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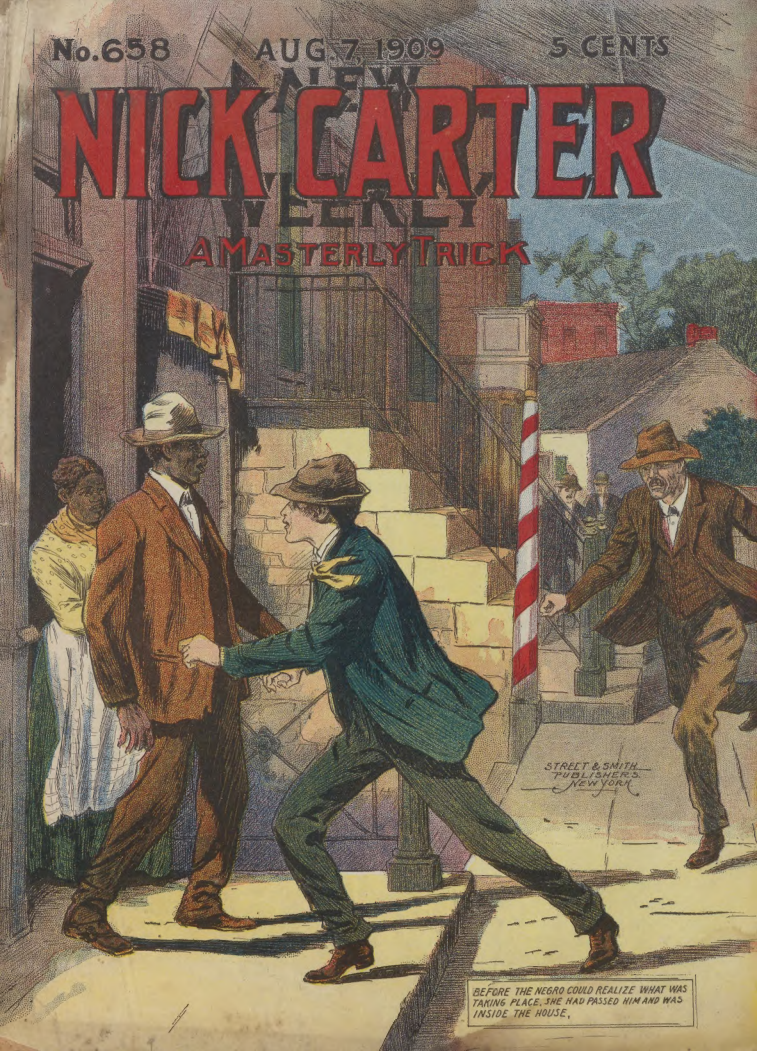
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

A MASTERLY TRICK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BEFORE THE NEGRO COULD REALIZE WHAT WAS TAKING PLACE, THE HAD PASSED HIM AND WAS INSIDE THE HOUSE.

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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A MASTERLY TRICK;

OR,

Chick and the Beautiful Italian.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.*

NICK CARTER'S BEAUTIFUL ASSISTANT.

Chick was seated at the desk in Nick Carter's study late in the afternoon of a day that was just one week after the capture of Romeo Donatello, the acknowledged chief of the Black Hand, and Chick wore a troubled countenance. There was reason for it, too.

Before him, on the desk, was an open letter, which he had just read through for the fourth or fifth time since it was put into his hands.

The letter that puzzled and perturbed him was not addressed to any member of that household, but had been received by a prominent Italian resident of the city, who had, in turn, taken it to police headquarters; and from the Central Office it had been forwarded to Nick Carter, by order of the commissioner.

It was the last that bothered Chick just then; not the letter itself, so much as the fact that Nick Carter was not at home to receive it, for the detective had been called away from the city, the preceding day, on pressing business which would admit of no delay; and he had gone, leaving Chick in full charge of his affairs at home.

These affairs included the further prosecution of the cases against the Black Hand, which had commenced with Case 656, and had been continued as far as the capture of Donatello, in Case 657.

Donatello's house in Madison Avenue had been thoroughly searched. His strong room, built like a vault in a bank, had been broken open and rifled of its papers and documents, and much of the secrets of the so-called Black Hand had been learned from them.

The consequence of this had been a series of wholesale arrests made by the police during the week just passed, and Nick had thought that he might as well go away for a time, believing that the Black Handers would now be quiet.

Yet he was gone only a few hours when proof was forthcoming that they were as active as ever, and Chick felt that he was now called upon to take entire charge of the matter in the absence of his chief.

The letter need not be quoted here in detail. It was a typical Black Hand letter, addressed to an Italian resident of the city, who had prospered in business, and from whom the blackmailers now demanded the

*Cases 656 and 657 would interest the reader as having, in a measure, led up to this one. They are entitled "The Black Hand" and "The Black Hand Nemesis."

sum of $5,000, on pain of assassination if he refused to pay over the money.

It is to be regretted that in most cases the Italians who receive such letters are inclined to meet the criminal demands made upon them rather than to report the matter to the police; but here was a case where the recipient of the letter had lost no time in forwarding the document at once to headquarters, including with it a letter of his own, in which he said that he would brave the wrath of the Black Handers rather than surrender to them.

Chick wished that his chief had not gone away. He wished that Nick was there at that moment to take personal charge of matters. Not that he felt himself incompetent in any way, but he did not like the responsibility of it just then, particularly as Patsy happened to be also away from home, and was not likely to return for several weeks.

As matters stood, Chick had nobody with whom to consult. The entire responsibility was with him; and then, while he frowned over the matter, his face suddenly cleared, and he smiled; he had recalled the name of Lucia di Giovanni.

Just a word right here as to Lucia.

She was the daughter of a once wealthy Italian who had been robbed of all his riches before he left Italy to come to America; who had sworn vengeance upon the men who victimized him; who had at last settled in New York, where, in order to carry out his scheme of vengeance, he had, with his son and daughter, joined the Black Hand, the better to betray its members.

But ultimately both he and his son had been "put out of the way" by the assassins, leaving only Lucia to carry on the vendetta; and Lucia had ultimately made herself the leader of one of the Black Hand societies; had finally told her life's story to Chick, and had been the chief factor in the ultimate capture of Romeo Donatello, in his own house in Madison Avenue.*

Lucia di Giovanni—known to the Black Hand as Lucia Deluzzio—was a young woman of remarkable beauty and intelligence, and she had expressed a desire to assist Nick Carter in any future work he might have against the Black Hand; a proposition which Nick Carter had accepted on the spot. But in the rush and hurry of business during the past week Chick had not had time to think about her. Now he remembered her, and what she had said, as well as all that she had offered to do. She lived in MacDougall Street, in a home of her own, and Chick, as he read the Black Hand letter through once again, resolved to go at once and consult with her.

There was still another character connected with the activities of the last few weeks who might have given advantageous aid to Chick, but he was also absent.

He was Antonino Beninato, familiarly known as Tony, a boy of sixteen, whose acquaintance Chick had made on the steamer—for in the beginning of these cases Chick had gone to Italy in order to return to America as an Italian immigrant in the steerage. And Tony had, later, shown himself capable of great things; but it had finally been decided that he was too young to undertake the arduous work of a detective, and he was sent to school instead.*

Chick had been thinking over all these things. He had been mentally bewailing the fact that he was entirely without assistance from any side, and would be obliged to prosecute the present case all alone, when the thought of Lucia di Giovanni came to him.

"She is doubtless at home in her house in MacDougall Street at this very moment," he said to himself, rising from his chair. "I will go down there to see her at once."

He reached out one hand to close down the top of the desk when there was a tap at the door, and Joseph, the butler, entered the room.

"Miss di Giovanni wants to see you, sir," he said.

"Good!" exclaimed Chick. "Show her up at once;" and he stood in the open doorway, waiting to greet the beautiful young Italian woman, who now came swiftly up the stairs toward him.

"I am particularly glad to see you this afternoon, Lucia," said Chick, extending his hand, grasping hers, and leading her into the study without relinquishing it. "There must be something in telepathy, after all. I was, just at the moment you were announced, starting for your house to find you?"

"Indeed?" she replied, smiling brightly upon him. Lucia was particularly fond of Chick, and he was strangely drawn to her, too; but there was never a word of this mentioned, or even suggested, between them. They were merely the warmest of friends. "Perhaps it wasn't telepathy so much as coincidence," she added.

"Eh? Coincidence? Why do you say that?"

"Because I suspect that you were going to see me

*Case 657.

*Case 656.

on the very matter which has brought me here to you," she replied.

"How could you know about that, Lucia?"

"I don't know. What is it?" she said, smiling mischievously. "Or shall I tell *you* what it is?"

"Suppose you try."

"Very good. As a mere guess, I will say that you have received a communication from the commissioner of police, in which he incloses a Black Hand letter that was yesterday received by a rich Italian named Salvatore Volpe. Am I right?"

"Indeed you are! But how in the world could you have guessed it?"

"I didn't guess it. Signor Volpe came to see me at my house early to-day to tell me all about it. I have known him many years. He does not know that I was ever associated in any way with the Black Hand, but he knew of my father's former troubles, and he came to me for sympathy."

"I see."

"He told me about the letter he had received, demanding five thousand dollars; told me that he had sent the letter to the police—and so I guessed that the commissioner would forward the letter to Nick Carter without delay. Joseph told me that Mr. Carter was away, and so I knew that you must have the letter. There you are. It is all very simple, after all, isn't it?"

"It is, to be sure."

"Now suppose you tell me why you were about to seek me, Chick."

"I think you should guess the answer to that, also," he replied, smiling at her. "I remembered your promise at the time we captured Donatello. I am utterly alone. Nick is absent on personal matters; Patsy is away on business; even Tony cannot be made useful just now, for he has begun his schooling, and Nick thinks he ought to stick to it for two or three years; so, you see, I was going to you."

"To get me to assist you?"

"Yes, with your knowledge of those people, at least."

"I will do more than that, Chick."

"I had an idea that you would, Lucia."

"I will be your active helper in this matter. Did I not promise Nick Carter that I would be his woman assistant if he would permit it? And did he not promise me that he would accept my services whenever they were needed? Well, here I am, ready and eager to help."

"Good for you!"

"Have you the letter that was received by Volpe?"

"Yes. It is here."

"Will you let me examine it?"

"Certainly. Here it is."

She took the letter in her hand and read it through carefully, frowning over it as she did so; but after a little she refolded it, but, still holding it in her hand, said:

"There are certain earmarks here, Chick, which I think I recognize. You must not forget that, while I was playing the part of leader of a section of the Black Hand, I became very conversant with their methods as practiced by different groups among them."

"I know that. It is why——"

"And you have not forgotten my abilities in the matter of disguising myself?"

"I should say not."

"Then, before we proceed further with this discussion, will you let me leave you for a few moments? Tony lives in the house with you, doesn't he? I want to go to his room, if you will show me where it is. He is not in the house at the present moment, is he?"

"No, to your last question; yes, to the others."

"You will wait for me here?"

"Surely."

"And, pray, think of something else than the Black Hand while I am gone."

With a light laugh she went out of the study and ascended another flight of stairs to the room to which Chick directed her, while Chick turned his attention to other matters.

Twenty minutes later he was roused out of his abstraction by a tapping at the door, which immediately opened to admit—whom? Chick stared in amazement. Then he laughed, well pleased.

Apparently it was an Italian youth who now stood before him; a youth of nineteen or twenty, so far as appearances went. He held an unlighted cigarette between his white teeth as he advanced into the room and threw his cap down upon a chair; but a ripple of light laughter that came from him as he did so announced the fact that the boy was not a boy at all, but was Lucia di Giovanni, perfectly disguised.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACK HAND CRIMINAL.

"You are splendid. The disguise is perfect," said Chick, gazing at Lucia with undoubted admiration in his eyes. As a young woman she was beautiful; as an Italian youth she was perfect; and, despite the fact

that she had done nothing to disguise her features, notwithstanding the fact that her beautiful face was unchanged, she managed somehow to bring into it an expression which was not only saucy in the extreme, but which was thoroughly in keeping with the character she had assumed.

She looked the boy, and she said that she felt it, also; and that, actors will tell you, is the real necessity in playing any part—to *feel* it and to *live* it, as well as act it.

Lucia had not attempted a reproduction of Tony. It would have been as impossible as it was unnecessary. She had only borrowed some of Tony's clothing for the occasion—and she found that everything fitted her perfectly—as if she were in reality a youth, and the clothes had been made to measure for her.

"Will I do?" she asked Chick, tossing her head saucily and showing her white teeth in a smile.

"Will you do? I should say so! You are perfect, as I said a moment ago. But you don't look in the least like Tony."

"I don't want to look like Tony. That is no part of the plan I have in mind."

"No?"

"I merely wish to look like a boy."

"Well, you do, all right. I'd never suspect that you are not one, if I didn't know."

"Splendid! I am very glad of that. How old do I appear to be?"

"Between eighteen and twenty. But there is one thing, Lucia——"

"You must not call me Lucia now."

"No? What shall I call you?"

"The Italian name, Luigi, will do. You may soften it to Louis. 'Loo-ee,'" she added, with another light laugh. "Now, what is that other thing you were about to mention?"

"Your hair. When I said that you look like a boy, I barred the hair. What in the world will you do with that? You have so much of it, and——"

"I shall cut it off," she replied coolly.

"What? Sacrifice all that beautiful hair? I won't consent to it, Lucia."

"You can't help yourself. Joseph was valet before he became butler, wasn't he?"

"Joseph is everything in this house. He is a major-domo. He is Nick's valet, he is butler for the house, and generalissimo for everything that it contains. Why?"

"Well, if he is a valet, he will know how to cut my hair for me. There, there. Don't you dare to raise a single objection, Chick. If I am to be an assistant in this establishment, I must be the real thing. I cannot be the real thing without cutting my hair—and when it is cut, it will curl. I will look like those pictures of the 'Neapolitan boy' you have often seen in the store windows. Now, I am going to find Joseph. I shall take him to Tony's room and have my hair cut as I want it. Not another word about the case until that is done; then we will talk about it."

"Very well."

In another half hour she was back again in the study, and the change had been wrought.

When Chick looked upon her he could not regret the loss of her wealth of hair, for as a boy, with the clustering black curls about her head, she was bewitching—since he knew that she was not a boy; but he confessed to himself, silently, that if he had not known the fact, he would never have guessed it.

Lucia had formerly been accustomed to appearing before her supposed followers in the Black Hand, disguised as her father—a little old man of fragile appearance, with a high dome of a forehead surmounted by a black silk cap. But in that character, and also in imitation of her own brother, whom she had copied many times—that brother who had been made a victim of the Black Hand—she had learned how to conduct herself when in masculine attire, and now she was not at all afraid that she could not carry it off perfectly.

In fact, she played her part almost unconsciously, and with perfection. She seemed to forget that she was a girl. She possessed that rare power of adaptation to circumstances which is the gift of but few; but it transformed her entirely.

In the character of a boy she felt as one, and thought as one, comported herself as one.

Chick looked upon her with unspeakable admiration for her great gifts, and he said:

"By Jove, Lucia, I begin to think that we will all be jealous of you."

"What do you mean by that remark?" she asked him.

"I mean that if you are as perfect in everything you undertake as you are in this particular part you are playing now, you will soon become the leading assistant, and Patsy and I will have to take a back seat."

"There is no danger of that," she laughed at him. "My work will be entirely different, will it not?"

"I suppose so."

"Don't you think we had better get down to business instead of wasting our time with nonsense?"

"Yes; I do."

"Well, here is the Volpe letter. I have kept it all this time because I wanted to study it, and, in doing so, to look at it frequently. Now, Chick, you have never questioned me very closely about my knowledge of the Black Hand in general. You know all about whatever specific knowledge I possessed as leader of one of the societies; but you know very little of the inferences I must have drawn from my association with those men."

"That is absolutely true. In fact, I had not thought of it in exactly that way."

"I know you did not."

"Will you tell me just what you mean, now?"

"This: When my father was killed, my brother and I took his place, after a fashion. That is to say, we became, together, the leaders of that particular group of men where you first saw me."

"I know that."

"We took turns as the leader. We were always working to betray the active assassins into the hands of the police, as you know. When my brother could not be there, I disguised myself and appeared in his place; nobody ever suspected the difference. By that means I was enabled to keep my own character as Lucia di Giovanni, and live in the house in MacDougall Street unsuspected by the men who would have murdered me without compunction had they known the truth."

"Indeed they would."

"Well, you understand a lot about the Black Hand, but there is a great deal that you do not know; if in telling you what I am about to say now, I touch upon things that you already know, let them pass."

"Surely."

"The Black Hand, as a perfected organization, does not exist. The Black Hand, as ruled over by one man, and as *one society*, is not a fact. Donatello came nearer to realizing the dream of many Sicilians—to organize the different factions into one great society of assassination—he came nearer to that than any other person ever has. The Black Hand is, perhaps, the natural outgrowth of certain old-time political organizations in Italy, which have long since lost their original motives for existence. There is the Mafia, and there are other societies often charged with fostering Black Hand methods, of practicing them; but they are not responsible for the many crimes committed under the name of Black Hand, by any means."

"I realize that, Lucia."

"Now, *what is the Black Hand?* Shall I tell you? I know what it is."

"Yes. Tell me your version of it."

"It is nothing more or less than a sort of guerrilla warfare, waged by a certain low class of Italians, against all society, but more particularly against their own well-to-do countrymen. Each company of those criminals is independent of all the others—and yet on occasion, two or three, or more of them, will work together. Each group of them has its own particular leader, and they will often betray one another as readily as they will prey upon the rest of mankind. A Black Hand outrage in the Bronx will have no relation to another outrage of the same kind in Brooklyn. A criminal act of the sort, committed on the East Side, will have no relation whatever to an act of the same sort on the West Side. Those who commit outrages in Harlem do not, or may not, know the men who do the same thing in the vicinity of Third Avenue and Fourteenth Street; and yet through it all is a similarity of method and a oneness of design—just as there is also a sympathetic understanding. Do you understand precisely what I mean?"

"Perfectly well, Lucia."

"Donatello tried to bring those different groups of men together under one head. He accomplished it, in part, but he could never have wholly succeeded—and for a very good reason, too."

"Why?"

"Because of all people in the world, Italians of that class are the most suspicious of one another. They are suspicious, jealous, and envious; and yet there is a certain amount of secret understanding between them always."

"I think I appreciate that fact fully."

"In the capture of Donatello we struck a great blow at Black Hand practices; but if the matter were permitted to rest there, it would soon be as flourishing as ever, believe me."

"I know it."

"With the aid of the papers you found inside the strong room at his house, you were enabled to make what the newspapers called 'wholesale arrests'; and by those arrests you destroyed, probably, a dozen different groups, or small societies, of the Black Hand. But the great point which we must now consider is that just as many more remain; and outside of them there are just as many others who are waiting for an opportunity to undertake the same sort of practices."

"That is precisely what Nick Carter says, Lucia."

"Well, it is true."

"The Black Hand can never wholly be done away with."

"No; not until the millennium comes. Black Hand is only a name for a certain class of crime, for a certain sort of criminal. The Sicilian criminal follows a peculiar method in committing crimes against his countrymen, just as the Chinaman, with his Tongs, does the same in his own case. Now, that brings me back to myself, Chick."

"Well?"

"Wait. I will tell you what I mean."

CHAPTER III.

A DIFFERENCE IN METHODS.

"You know what experiences I had myself with one group of the Black Hand. At least, you are familiar with a great deal of it," she continued after a short pause.

"Yes."

"I never at any one time controlled more than a dozen of those men—and I never had the same men under me very long at a time. The reason for that is obvious."

"You mean that, as soon as an outrage was agreed upon, you took means to inform the police so that the criminals would be caught."

"Precisely; but always there were others who stood ready to take their places among the ranks that I controlled."

"I know."

"I thought you were such a one, you remember, the first time you came to me, when you were disguised as Guiseppe Falerino."

"I remember."

"But—and here is the point—personally, I knew, at different times, of other organizations like mine. I call it mine for the sake of brevity."

"Yes."

"Each one of my men knew of other organizations—and it is doubtful if any two or three of them knew the same ones. Understand, Chick?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes a man would come to me and say, 'I have worked with Antonio this, or Guiseppe that, or Luigi some one else,' and I would take him on, as you would express it. Often he would go away again if he thought that business was dull with us, or if he liked better the others, with whom he had worked before. But he never forgot himself so far as to tell me, or any of us, the secrets of that other group of men."

"I see."

"Therefore, the knowledge I obtained of others was superficial; most of it was merely inference."

"Yes."

"But I studied closely. I observed closely. I learned by that means to recognize the handiwork of many different groups—just as your trained detective recognizes the work of certain professional burglars."

"Naturally."

"Now, that brings me again to this Volpe letter."

"Well?"

"When Mr. Volpe told me about it, this morning, my first regret was that he had not the letter with him; but when he told me what he had done with it, I assumed at once that the commissioner would forward it to Nick Carter—which he did, although you received it."

"In the absence of my chief—yes."

"So I came here for the double purpose of assisting you, and also to discover if my former study of the Black Handers had given me sufficient insight concerning them so that I would be enabled to guess, even, the source of that letter; that is, the actual source; the group of men from which it came."

"And can you place it now?"

"When I first saw it, there was something familiar about it, although I could not determine just what it was. When I went to Tony's room to dress in these clothes, I took the letter with me to give it more study. But still it puzzled me."

"And now?"

"By continuous study and thinking, I believe that I have worked it out. I have decided in my own mind that the Volpe letter was sent out at the instigation of a certain man who used to be with my group for a time."

"Wait. Tell me how you are able to place it so definitely; that is, down to an individual—as you indicate that you have done."

"By the methods employed in this case. Remember, you have not talked with Mr. Volpe. I have done so."

"Yes."

"That letter is written in Italian. There are certain expressions used in it which narrow it down to a certain class of Italians—of Italian criminals, I mean."

"I understand."

"Then we come to the methods."

"Wait again, Lucia. Just what do you mean, in this case, by methods?"

"I mean the character of the threats; the amount demanded; the nature of the punishment that will be meted out by the criminal in case the victim refuses to be victimized. Among the Black Handers there are distinct tastes in crime, if I may use that word."

"Well?"

"For example, a man called X will make his demands in hundreds. Z will make his in thousands. X will threaten death. Z will threaten the abduction of a child. A will adopt entirely different methods from any of the others. B will have a method wholly his own; and so on, *ad infinitum*."

"I see what you mean. It is a fine point, and one would have to know as much as you do about the inside workings of those organizations to get at it."

"Yes. That is the point. That is why I am presuming to inform you. I hope you don't think that I would attempt to do so otherwise."

"Lucia, none of us is wise enough so that we need not learn. The information you are giving me is very valuable. I might pursue the Black Hand outfit for years without learning as much as you have already told me. But now about this letter?"

"You have good reason to remember Dominico Lacava," she told him.

"I certainly have."

"He is now in prison, of course. But he was, formerly, before he came with me, with a group that flourished in Harlem. He has often told me a great deal about them. He used to brag of their methods, and often tried to induce me to adopt them. It was the recollection of things that Lacava used to say to me which suggested my familiarity with the phrasing, and with the specific threats contained in this letter."

"I see."

"You have not told me what the commissioner had to say in the letter he sent you when he inclosed that one to you."

"I will read it to you. It is to the chief, you know."

"Yes."

"He says: 'My dear Nick: The inclosed letter explains itself. Make such use of it as you think best. Personally, I do not believe that the old methods, of trying to catch the fellows when the money is paid over to them, will work. Volpe, who received the letter, is considerably worked up over it. You will observe that the threat made in the letter is very general in its character. The Black Hand threatens either to murder one of the members of Volpe's family—not stating which one is in danger—or to abduct one of his children—not stating which one. He has three daughters and two sons. Yours, etc.' That is all."

For a time after that Lucia was silent. Then she said:

"During my experience with my father, and since then, I have seen a great many Black Hand letters. I think it is perfectly safe to say that if you were to select a thousand such letters, you would find that nine hundred and ninety-nine of them contained, and made, specific threats. That one would be the thousandth letter."

Chick nodded.

"Well, that was the particular method which Lacava had been taught—of making general threats instead of specific ones."

Chick nodded again.

"His claim was that a man who received such a letter as that one is was much more greatly terrified than if his life was threatened, or than if any specific threat was made. In the latter case he could guard against it, after a fashion; but in a case such as this one is, he never knows what to protect."

"I think he was right about that."

"Certainly he was."

"Well, if that letter came from the source I think it did, I will know pretty nearly where to find the men who are behind it. If Mr. Volpe does not keep the appointment made therein, and pay the money over to them as he is directed to do, at two o'clock to-morrow afternoon, the men who sent it would wait another day and then send a second letter."

"And, that failing, what would then be their method? The method of this particular group of men?"

"In this case, where so much is demanded—five thousand dollars—they would doubtless send a third letter. That is the method where large sums are demanded."

"Would the third one contain a specific threat, do you think?"

"No. Not in any case."

"Well, then, after the third letter—what?"

"Probably a bomb would be exploded under Volpe's doorsteps; a bomb sufficient to destroy the steps, but not big enough to do very much damage. Then he would receive a fourth letter. It would probably say, in effect: 'Be warned by what has already happened. Another and a last chance will be given you. Pay up or take the consequences.'"

"And then?"

"If he still refused to pay, doubtless one of the

younger children would be stolen. If he put the police on their tracks, one of the daughters might be abducted."

"Well, at least, if they go to all the trouble you have described, it gives us ample time in which to do our part of the work."

"Yes. I think we will have time."

Chick once more examined the letter they were discussing.

"I don't know that it would be a bad idea to let Volpe appear to accede to the demand," he said musingly. "Of course that method has been tried so often that the Black Hand workers have become very wary; but still——"

"What are you thinking about, Chick?" she asked him.

"This letter directs that the money must be paid over to them at two o'clock to-morrow afternoon. It directs Volpe to go in his automobile across the Fort Lee ferry, following the Fort Lee road northward, on the other side of the Hudson; that somewhere along the road he will see three men approaching him, and that one of them will have a red handkerchief; that thereupon Volpe is to stop his car, and hand over a package which will contain the money, and that thereafter he must drive on rapidly—and that he must be absolutely alone in his car."

"Well?"

"I was wondering if I could not make up to look like Volpe, and do the job for him, that's all. I think I would like to tackle those three men. That is rather a well-traveled road, as possibly you know. Two o'clock in the afternoon is a time of day when a fight would quickly draw others to the scene over there. But, now, I don't think we will make the effort. We will try some other method."

"I am inclined to think the best one will be to find their headquarters," said Lucia.

"Oh, I want to find that place, of course; but what, then? We will only find the men who have made the threat. We will not have any proof of this particular case against them."

"That is true."

"And that is what we want—proof."

"I know."

"We'll think the matter over."

"Why not attempt *both* methods?" asked Lucia.

"Precisely what I was thinking of," replied Chick.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BLACK HAND LETTERS.

"I know what we will do," said Chick, rising suddenly from his chair; but, after he had crossed the room twice, he returned to it and reached out for the telephone. Lucia left the room for a moment while he was talking, and when she returned to it he said to her:

"I have been talking with headquarters, Lucia. I have arranged that an Italian lad whom I shall send down to the Tombs at once will be permitted to see Dominico Lacava without question."

"I am, of course, the Italian lad; eh?"

"Certainly. You will be afforded a private interview with Lacava. I presume that directions to that effect have been telephoned to the Tombs already."

"Oh, yes; that part of it was easy enough to arrange; but what do you expect me to accomplish by seeing Lacava and talking with him?" she asked.

"That depends upon yourself. You have said that Lacava was once, as you believe, a member of that very group of men who are now persecuting Volpe."

"I believe it; yes. I think I have good cause to believe it; but I do not know it."

"You must take a chance on that, Lucia."

"But what is your plan?"

"It is rather a vague one, I will admit, but I rely upon your own intuition and wit to carry it through."

"Well?"

"If your deductions are correct; if the Volpe letter was sent out by the same men with whom Lacava was once intimately associated, he will know considerable about them. It has also occurred to me that he would not have left that party to go to you if there had not been some sort of trouble to force him to do so."

"I have thought of that."

"You must manufacture some excuse for calling upon Lacava in prison. I leave that to your own wit. Once in his presence——"

She smiled as she interrupted him.

"Once in Lacava's presence," she said, "he will be so suspicious of me that he will not say a word. He will be as dumb as an oyster. He will jump at the conclusion that I am a detective, and he will treat me as one."

"Sure. I expected that. But you must overcome his suspicions."

"But what am I to find out from him?"

"All that you can about the men with whom he used to train before he went to Grove Street. It isn't un-

likely that he has kept up an acquaintance with one or more of them. He probably knows their meeting place. It isn't unlikely that he can tell you exactly how to find them—and find them together. That is important, as you know."

"Yes."

"It is your first real assignment, Lucia, in the character you have now assumed. Let's see what you can make of it. I am sending you to Lacava on the mere chance that you may possibly obtain valuable information from him. There are many chances to one that you will not; but there is always the opportunity that you may succeed in doing so. It is worth the trial."

"I agree with you. What shall you be doing in the meantime?"

"I shall carry a letter, which you will now write for me, to Salvatore Volpe. A letter of introduction to him from Lucia di Giovanni. One which will induce him to open his heart to me and to talk quite frankly about himself, etc. You understand?"

"Yes. You will go to him—how?"

"I will go to him in the character of Nick Carter. It will be best, don't you think?"

"No. Go in your own character. I have already mentioned your name to him."

"Very well; let it be so."

Lucia seated herself at the desk and wrote rapidly for a moment; then she folded the note and gave it to Chick; then she said:

"I had better go to the Tombs at once, don't you think?"

"Yes; by all means."

"When shall I see you again to make my report?"

"Whenever there is a report to make. While you are playing your present character, we had better keep apart as much as possible. I have a notion that more than one member of the Black Hand is trying to keep tabs on what is happening at Nick Carter's house these days."

"There isn't a doubt of that."

"We have already stirred them up considerably. It was a blow to them, our last raid."

"But when shall I see you, Chick?"

"I can't say. Come here when you have discovered something that is worth telling me. At all events, be here to-morrow morning by eight o'clock."

"And to-night?"

"I may or may not be at home to-night. It will depend largely upon what Volpe has to tell me. I may spend the night in chasing around the city after further information; but we will make an appointment to meet here in the morning."

"So all the instructions you care to give me now are included in the general ones to see Lacava and to get from him all the information possible?"

"Yes."

Within a short time after the departure of Lucia from the house, Chick, with the letter in his pocket, took his way to the residence of Salvatore Volpe.

He found the banker at home, for it was then late in the afternoon, and, as soon as the latter had read the letter written by Lucia, he extended his hand in cordial greeting.

"I am very glad indeed to know you," he said, in perfect English. "I sent the threatening letter at once to the police, and they have lost no time in transmitting it to you. Now, I will place myself unqualifiedly in your hands, and will do whatever you direct in the matter."

"If all the intended victims of the Black Hand were as ready to assist the police as you are, Mr. Volpe, Black Hand outrages would soon cease," replied Chick.

"I believe that, sir; but you must remember that the first impulse that one feels upon the receipt of such a letter as mine is terror. My own inclination was to rush off at once and pay the five thousand dollars demanded of me."

"But that would not improve the situation."

"No; that is just the point. If, by the payment of the five thousand dollars, I could forever be freed from persecution by those people, I would pay it cheerfully. I would pay more than that for positive immunity. But I could not get it. That is why I communicated with the police."

"I understand. The payment of this sum would only open the way for other demands in the future."

"Yes; and even greater ones."

"They would regard you as an easy mark. You would not long be left in peace."

"I would never have any peace again."

"And now what do you anticipate that the consequences will be when it is known that you have defied them?"

"Ah, they are too terrible to dwell upon; and, besides, nobody can tell what those consequences may be. The mere thought of them sets me trembling."

"Give me your idea."

"I have no ideas on the subject, save only the knowledge that those men do not make idle threats."

"Well?"

"When they have made positive that I have defied

them, they will strike some sort of a cowardly blow, and no man can foresee where it will fall. It may be that one of my children will be stolen away from me, or that one of them will be killed. My bank may be blown up at any moment. My house may be set afire. A bomb may be thrown through my window. One of the members of my family may be shot down in the street. Oh, it is terrible."

"Mr. Volpe, was this letter the first one of the kind you have received?"

"No. It makes the third one."

"Tell me about the others."

"The first demand made upon me came a little more than a year ago. It was for five hundred dollars."

"What did you do about that?"

"I paid the sum demanded."

"Oh, you did? Did you do it without protest of any sort, and without consulting others?"

"I have never mentioned the fact to anybody until this moment. But I did another thing in connection with paying over the money, which, possibly, I ought to tell you about."

"I wish you to tell me everything, sir."

"At that time, or rather on that occasion, I was instructed to take the five hundred dollars with me and walk through Washington Square, at midnight, of a certain date. I was to pass the money, in bills, to a man who would meet me in the middle of the square, and ask for it. Well, I did all that; but I did more."

"What more?"

"I wrapped a note I had written inside the roll of money. In that note I promised, in case I was not again molested, to meet the same man, or another one, at the same time and place, at exactly a year from that date, and pay over five hundred dollars more if I remained unmolested in the meantime; and I agreed to continue the practice as long as I was granted entire immunity."

"Well?"

"I figured it out that I was paying a low price for the protection I would receive."

"Yes; it would cost you more than that to hire detectives."

"Surely."

"What happened after that?"

"Nothing at all—until the day before the date when I was to pay the next five hundred."

"And then——?"

"I received a second note."

"From the same parties?"

"Evidently."

"What did that note say to you?"

"I was told that the time had arrived, and that the message was to remind me of it. I was also informed that five hundred dollars was not enough, and that I must supply a thousand dollars instead. They offered the same argument that you did: That it would cost me as much or more than a thousand dollars to hire body guards."

"Well, what was the result of that letter?"

"I kept the appointment, and I paid the thousand dollars."

"I see. You met their demands without question."

"Yes; and I included another letter to them."

"What did you say in that letter?"

"I said that I would stand for the thousand, and would pay it year by year, as agreed for the five hundred, but that I could not go any higher than that amount, and I hoped that they would not ask me to do so—that I hoped to have another year of peace."

"Well?"

"Well, that was a little more than a month ago; and now I receive the letter that we have been discussing."

"Have you the other letters they sent to you?"

"Yes. I have saved them."

"There is no doubt, is there, that this last letter came from the same parties who sent the other two?"

"None whatever, sir."

CHAPTER V.

THE PRISONER IN THE TOMBS.

"Mr. Volpe, have you any idea as to the source of those letters?"

"No more than you have, sir; possibly not as much."

"You don't suppose that there is any personal enmity involved in the affair?"

"No. I am merely a selected victim, that is all; because I happen to possess money."

"There is, then, no vendetta in this?"

"I don't think so."

"What about the man to whom you twice paid over money? Would you recognize him if you should see him again?"

"No. I don't think it was the same man on both occasions. In each instance, the man to whom I paid the money was so muffled about the face that I could not see his features, and it was plain that he disguised his voice when he spoke to me."

"You have, then, no clue, personally, to the identity of those people?"

"None whatever."

"Is it your opinion that those men confidently expect that you will meet their last demand as you did the others?"

"Yes; I do think that."

"You proved so easy on the previous occasions, that now they believe you can be bled for any amount?"

"That is the idea."

"There is a decided change in the manner of paying over the money. Instead of asking you to do it in the night, on foot, you are told to take the money with you in your automobile, to cross the Fort Lee ferry, and meet three men on the road. Wouldn't that suggest to you that these people are not the same as the others?"

"No; but it would suggest——"

"What does it suggest, Mr. Volpe?"

"That they wish me to think they are not the same ones."

"Ah, I see." Chick laughed. "You are supposing that they are somewhat modest. They don't wish you to suppose that they are the same ones, after you have already been so good to them, eh? That is not a bad idea. Now, as to to-morrow, and the appointment."

"Yes?"

"You have said that you will be guided by me."

"I will. I meant it. I shall not pay that five thousand dollars to those men. If I did so, it would not be six months—perhaps not two, or one—before I would receive another demand, doubtless for ten thousand dollars. I would be beggared."

"You might as well close your bank at once and give up business."

"I have been thinking seriously of doing that very thing since I received the last letter, sir."

"I think you had better wait a while before you decide that. But as for the meeting on the Fort Lee road to-morrow—I don't want you to keep that appointment."

"No; I shall not keep it. But I thought that possibly you would wish to send somebody there in my place."

"No; and during the fore part of the day to-morrow, I wish you to be seen as conspicuously as possible about your place of business—particularly when the time comes for you to go to the appointment; if you were to keep it."

"I understand."

"I want them, if they are watching, to know that you are at the bank, and have no intention of leaving it."

"Very well."

"That is all for the present."

"After two o'clock to-morrow my life will be one continuous hell of dread and doubt," said the banker, brushing his hand across his eyes.

"I don't think you need feel that way, Mr. Volpe; at least, not so soon."

"Why not?"

"I have thought over the matter and studied it very carefully. I have discussed it with the young lady who gave me that note to you. We are both of the opinion that you will not be in danger until after the receipt of a second letter, and possibly a third."

"Perhaps you are right about that."

"It was our opinion before I saw you; but now since I know that you have twice before been a victim of those men, that you have twice paid money to them, I am sure that they will use every effort possible before they resort to violence."

"Let us hope so, at least."

When Chick parted with Volpe he went straight to the Tombs, for he, too, wished to have a talk with the man Lacava; only in his own case he meant to conduct it openly, and as a detective, without trying to deceive the man at all. He had a double purpose in this, and neither of them conflicted in any way with the errand of Lucia, which he correctly supposed had been already accomplished.

When he arrived at the Tombs he went at once to the warden's office, and presently, at his request, was admitted to the galleries, where he was left to find his way alone to the grating of Lacava's cell.

Lacava had good reason to remember Chick. He had known the detective as Guiseppe Falerino, as well as in his proper character; and now when Chick paused outside the barred door and looked in upon him, he scowled forbiddingly; then he calmly turned his back.

For a time he refused utterly to exchange a word with Chick; but at last, when the latter had bantered him for a time, he turned around and exclaimed:

"What do you come here for, anyhow? Who wants to see you?"

"I thought you would be glad to see anybody you know—even the man you hold responsible for putting you where you are, Lacava," replied Chick. "I don't suppose you have seen a friendly face since you came here, have you?"

"Huh!" grunted Lacava. It was the only reply he would make.

"Your Black Hand friends haven't fallen over one another in rushing to your assistance, have they?"

"You wouldn't know it if they had," was the retort.

"Possibly not. I should think you'd rather like it here, Lacava. Now confess that you are really glad to see me."

"If it was a dark night, and we met on a lonely road—I would be glad to see you," was the scowling response.

"Of course—always provided you knew me to be unarmed and that you had assistance ready at hand. You wouldn't care to meet me alone, would you?"

A grunt was the only reply to this remark.

"Lacava, how would you like to get out of here and return to Italy? to live there?"

"I don't think you need to ask that question," was the quick reply.

"Well, there is a way in which you can accomplish all that."

"Oh, yes, I know. You want me to peach."

"Yes; that is the slang for what I want you to do."

"Well, look here. I couldn't if I wanted to; and I wouldn't if I could."

"I think you are lying now. I am sure that you could tell me a lot of things that I want to know if you were disposed to do so."

"Maybe I could; and, again, maybe I couldn't."

"If you will promise to answer all the questions I shall ask you, I will promise, in return, that after you have been detained here long enough to prove the truth of what you tell me, you shall be set at liberty, and a ticket will be given you on a steamship to Italy. How does it strike you, Lacava?"

"It strikes me that you are a fool to propose such a thing to me," was the surly reply.

"Why so?"

"Because you know that I wouldn't dare do it, even if I wanted to—which I do not."

"You wouldn't dare?"

"No. My life wouldn't be worth that"—and he snapped his fingers—"if I should blow."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Am I sure? Well, I should say so. I'd be worse off in Italy than I am here. The men I told on over here would write letters to Italy if I went there, and I would be shot down in the street, as Petrosino was shot, or I would be stabbed in the back. I'd be killed, anyhow."

"I should suppose that you would prefer to take your chances with liberty than as you are now."

"Not much, I wouldn't."

"Your friends have deserted you, haven't they?"

"Say; if you don't ask questions, you won't hear any lies—from me."

"Do you know a man named Salvatore Volpe?"

"Yes, I know such a man. Why?"

"He received a letter yesterday demanding five thousand dollars, and——"

"The fools!" said Lacava, under his breath.

"What's that?" asked Chick quickly.

"Nothing. I didn't say anything."

"Yes, you did. You said: 'The fools!' and I understand exactly what you meant by that expression."

"If you understood it, what's the use asking me about it, then?"

"I'll tell you that, Lacava; and, after I have told you, possibly you will be a little more inclined to talk."

"Well?"

"A little more than a year ago—before you went with the Grove Street crowd—you were with the same men who sent this five-thousand-dollar letter to Volpe. I know that. I wouldn't be surprised if you were the very man who received five hundred dollars, and a letter, from him in Washington Square. Am I right about that?"

"I'm not answering questions—yet."

"I want you to put me on the trail of those fellows, Lacava."

"I'll see you hung first!"

"Listen: You left them because you had a quarrel with them, didn't you? You have got an old grudge against——"

"Say, mister, that'll be about all, I guess. If there is any more talking to be done, you will have to do it all. I'm through." And he calmly turned his back upon Chick.

"Won't you talk the matter over with me at all?"

"No."

"Not even if I offer you——"

"It won't make a bit of difference what you offer me. I won't talk."

"You have already received one call to-day before I came. Who was that?"

"None of your business."

"Wasn't that young man one of your old crowd?"

"Oh, say, you make me tired! Do you suppose I'd tell you if he was? And do you suppose that any of that crowd would come here to see me now? Not much, they wouldn't—especially when they've got an easy mark like Volpe to monkey with."

"You won't tell me who the young chap was who called upon you to-day?"

"Oh, rats! You give me a pain! Get out! Go away and leave me! I don't want you here. I am going up the river, all right, but they won't give me more than four or five years. After that—after I get out again I'll look after you, mister. I don't forget things. I'll have it in for you, all right."

Chick shrugged his shoulders and left the man.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE TRAIL.

Chick returned home, expecting that he would find Lucia already there. Lacava had told him enough to make it certain that Lucia had seen the man, and also had succeeded in convincing him that she, at least, was not a detective who had been sent there to pump him.

But whether she had obtained any information or not that would be worth the effort made to get it was another matter. Chick doubted it.

The afternoon had deepened into evening by the time Chick arrived at the house. He told Joseph that Lucia would probably be there to dinner, but when the hour for it came and went and she did not appear, he decided that she had sought information in other quarters, and would content herself with keeping the appointment she had made with him for the morrow.

Later in the evening Chick disguised himself as an Italian laborer, and went to Harlem, where he nosed around in the Italian quarter of that district until nearly midnight. He was not seeking anything in particular save general information—and to make himself a familiar figure in the disguise he wore around that neighborhood.

After he thought he had accomplished that he went home and to bed.

In the morning, at eight o'clock—the time when Lucia was due—Pietro, her servant, appeared and gave Chick a note.

"Dear Chick," she wrote. "I saw Lacava and had an extended talk with him. I obtained the nucleus of considerable information from him, although there was nothing definite to be had. He would not talk with me, only in generalities. But he did tell me enough, so that if I were really what I represented myself to be I could work on what he said. You see, though, I was not in a position to guess very much. Had I really been connected with those men in Harlem, the things that Lacava told me would help. As it is, all of it is very vague.

"Nevertheless, I am going up there to-night"—the note was written the preceding day—"to see what I can find out. In all probability I shall report to you at the appointed time in the morning, but if I do not, don't be worried. I will be all right, and my non-appearance will only be proof that I have found a trail, and am pursuing it. LUCIA."

"What time was Lucia at her home last night, Pietro?" Chick asked of her servant after he had read the note.

"She left the house at nine o'clock last night, sir," was the reply.

"Why did you not bring the note to me at once?"

"Because she ordered me to bring it to you this morning, at eight."

"Oh; very well. That is all."

Chick remained in the house till noon, thinking that he might hear again from Lucia, or that she would appear; but at noon he hastily donned a disguise as an Italian laborer, and at one o'clock he secretly left the house.

His appearance was that of an ordinary pick-and-shovel Italian worker in the trenches; the same that you see hundreds of, every day, in New York. They ride on the cars and crowd you out of a seat; they walk over your newly polished shoes without even so much as an apology, and they are more noisy with their monkey-like chatter than a pack of dogs.

Chick took the subway to the Manhattan Street station, where he got down and hurried to the Fort Lee ferry.

It was half-past one when he arrived at the opposite side of the river, and he walked northward along the road that Volpe would have taken with his automobile had the banker carried out the instructions contained in the Black Hand letter he received.

Chick's purpose was one of observation only.

He hoped that, by careful watching, he might be able to pick out the three men whom he was sure would have been sent over there to meet Volpe. He meant to follow them in such a case.

He believed that he would be able to detect them by their manner. He thought they would more than likely present the appearance of loitering in the neighborhood.

At a distance of about a mile up the road from the ferry he came upon a place where the highway was undergoing extensive repairs. Before the Buena Vista

Hotel it was all torn up, and all the labor was being done by Italians.

From one extremity of the torn-up road to the other there must have been fifty or more of them employed, and Chick thought he understood at once why that particular place had been selected by the blackmailers for Volpe to hand over the package of money.

It was not likely, under the circumstances, that three strange Italians would attract attention; so many others were working there that the three would pass without notice.

And so Chick peered about him, as soon as he passed the hotel, to discover three strangers—not strangers exactly, but three Italians who were not actually engaged upon the work.

The highway is a regular thoroughfare for all sorts of vehicles passing between the ferry along the Palisades and New York. Automobiles bound for Fort Lee, Hackensack, and many other sections of the country back of the Hudson pass that way.

At the ferry, the boats enter the slip every half hour, and any one standing along the road can easily tell when a boat is in by the number of automobiles that pass.

Chick's game, then, was to watch down the road until he saw automobiles approaching from the direction of the ferry, and then to give his attention to the men to see if any of them appeared more than ordinarily interested in the approaching cars.

Luck presently assisted the detective in what he was doing.

An automobile approached, up the road, containing only one man, and that one happened to be dark and swarthy in appearance. At a distance he did not look unlike Volpe, arrayed in duster and goggles.

As the car drew nearer and entered upon the roughest part of the road it had to proceed very slowly; and then it was that the three men whom Chick had been observing stepped forward toward it, and seemed for the moment to be working with the others around them.

One of them seized a shovel; another took up a pick; and these two, as the car drew near, managed to roll a rock in its way that compelled it to come to a stop.

It was then that the third man of the trio stepped quickly forward past his two friends, and made some remark in an undertone to the man under the steering wheel.

Of course, the man was not Volpe—had probably never heard of him; and the consequence was that he only stared at the Italian who had spoken to him; and then, as the rock had been rolled out of the way, he drove on.

But he left three rather dismayed dagoes behind him on the road; and they chattered together for a time, desisting only when others approached them.

Chick, from a distance, kept watch; and presently, when the trio moved away down the road, he kept them in sight, although at such a distance that they did not suspect they were followed.

The detective knew that he could not very well lose them now; and he had not the least doubt that they were the men who had been sent to collect the $5,000, if Volpe had taken it to the rendezvous.

But he did not take it there. He had not appeared, and the men sent to make the collection were proportionately disgruntled.

They chattered their polyglot of a language; sometimes in loud tones so that Chick could catch here and there a word, but usually in tones so low that he could hear nothing; and so they arrived at the ferry.

Chick believed that they had not noticed him at all; but, nevertheless, he made some alterations in his appearance, so that when he entered the ferry house after them they would not recognize in him the same man they had seen on the road, and up at the place where the highway was undergoing repairs.

He followed them across the ferry and into a cross-town car.

They left the car at Lenox Avenue, and he did likewise; and after that he followed them to One Hundred and Thirty-third Street.

But there, instead of turning in either direction along the cross street, they came to a stop on the corner; and after chattering some more in an undertone which Chick could not overhear, although he got as close to them as possible, one of them detached himself from the group and hastened along the street toward Seventh Avenue.

For a moment Chick was in a quandary.

He did not know whether to follow the man who left the group, or to remain where he was and watch the remaining two. The time was not yet four o'clock in the afternoon, and there was little hope of accomplishing much save in the way of general information.

But the actions of the other two convinced Chick that they intended to await the return of their companion, and therefore he hurried along the street after the other one.

Now, that section of the city is not an Italian quarter at all.

It is, in fact, irreverently called Darktown by a great many. It is well named such, too, for certainly a large portion of the colored population has preempted it for their own uses.

Chick was consequently somewhat surprised to see the Italians stop there and wait for their companion; and still more surprised when, presently, that companion turned into a house where the doorstep swarmed with negroes.

But he entered it as though he knew his way perfectly well, and the negroes paid no attention to him. In a word, they acted as if they were accustomed to seeing an Italian enter by that doorway. The fact was significant, and it decided Chick that he would make his investigation of the premises later on.

For the present he contented himself by walking along past the house, on the opposite side of the street, of course, and presently turning back again, where he discovered the other two Italians still waiting on the corner.

This time, when they saw Chick, they seemed to take particular notice of him.

As he approached them, Chick could see that they whispered together, and as their eyes continued to be fixed upon him, he had not a doubt that he was the subject of their conversation.

Then, as he drew nearer, one of them stepped forward and accosted him, speaking in Sicilian Italian.

"Why have you followed us?" he demanded, with an ugly gleam in his eyes; and, at the same time, the second one stepped nearer, to be ready at hand, doubtless, if his companion should get into trouble.

"You are mistaken," replied Chick. "I have not followed you, have I? I have just come out of this street, and you were standing here at the corner. Is it not so?"

"But you were over at Fort Lee. You were where the road is being repaired. You came over on the same ferryboat. You rode on the same car. You walked up the avenue. You are here," insisted the man, scowling fiercely. He had thrust one hand into his coat, and Chick had not a doubt that the fingers of it grasped the hilt of a stiletto.

But Chick did not flinch. He stood his ground. He smiled, too.

"One may look for work," he said. "Isn't that what you were doing? Why should I follow you?"

He half turned, as if to walk away, but one of the two stepped in front of him.

"Wait," he demanded savagely. "Wait until the return of Guiseppe. He will know what to say to you."

"And who is Guiseppe?"

"Guiseppe is he whom you followed to the house door just now, when you noted so carefully which house he entered."

"Bah!" said Chick; and then, over the man's shoulders, he saw that an officer was approaching, and he acted quickly. He knew that if he could have these two men arrested on some charge, no matter how trivial, it would be greatly to his advantage to do so; and here was the opportunity ready at hand.

He lifted his right hand and slapped the face of the Italian who was talking to him, and then he leaped backward just in time to avoid the knife thrust that followed his act.

And then the policeman, seeing the trouble, started forward on a run toward them.

CHAPTER VII.

CHICK PLAYS A MASTERLY TRICK.

Naturally, both the Italians sprang toward Chick to attack him the moment he slapped the face of one of them.

Both drew weapons, too, which was quite as natural, although Chick relied solely upon his fists. He had not a doubt that they would suffice. You see, he was working toward a definite purpose, born the instant he discovered the policeman approaching the spot where they were standing. Chick thought he recognized the officer, too; a patrolman named O'Neil, attached to the Thirty-sixth Precinct. If the man should prove to be O'Neil, the rest would be easy.

Chick's purpose was to create this row purposely, so that he could have the two Italians arrested and taken to the station house before the reappearance of their companion, who had gone into the house down the street.

As the two sprang toward the detective, he struck one of them a well-directed blow and knocked him down; and he fell so hard that he remained where he had fallen, quivering, upon the stone flagging of the pavement.

The other man was at the same time rushing forward, knife in hand, and raised ready for instant use; but Chick's toe flew upward, caught the fellow on the wrist, and the weapon was sent halfway across the street by the force of that kick.

Then O'Neil came upon the scene and grabbed the

Italian from behind; and at the same time he pulled his gun and covered Chick.

"Hands up!" he ordered, and Chick obeyed; but he took occasion to step forward and into a position so that the man arrested could not see him. Then he spoke quickly, in a low tone, using the single word, "Carter."

O'Neil is a trifle cross-eyed, but he isn't in the least cross-minded. He can think very quickly and mighty straight. He grinned. Then he winked; and Chick winked back again.

O'Neil nodded that he understood, and so Chick went closer to him, and whispered into the officer's ear:

"I am Chickering Carter. This is an important case, O'Neil, and I particularly want these fellows out of the way for a while. Will you take them in and keep them for me? You need not keep them long. Forget about the weapons, and just make a charge of street fighting. Only get them away from here as soon as possible."

"That I will," replied O'Neil. "Suppose I let 'em escape before I get them to the station house. How will that do?"

"It will do all right. I only want them out of the way for half an hour. After that I don't care."

"All right, Chick. I'll help you out."

Just then one of the prisoners, he whom Chick had struck with his fist, began to talk volubly in Italian, addressing Chick, whom he supposed to be a countryman; and by what he said Chick understood that neither of the men knew English.

The fellow said he was sorry; that he didn't want to go to the station house; that he saw that Chick could speak English, and he wished he would ask the officer to let them go; that and a lot more of the same sort he asked, and so Chick addressed O'Neil again.

"They don't understand English," he said. "They are pleading with me to let up on them. I am going to say that, because you have arrested them, you cannot let them go right here, but that on my representation you have consented to give them their liberty after you have taken them a block or two away."

O'Neil nodded, and Chick turned to the two prisoners.

"It is all right," he said. "The policeman says he can't let you go here, where he has arrested you, but if you will accompany him quietly down the avenue, he'll let you get away very soon. He won't take you to the station house. But you are not to run away from him until he gives you permission."

The two fellows were profuse in their thanks. Then one of them asked:

"How comes it that he will do all this for you? Who are you?"

"He doesn't do it for me. He does it because it is such a long way to the station house that he doesn't want to go all the way there just now. Besides, I told him that we are all sorry."

A moment later Chick was alone on the corner, save for the passers-by; and ten minutes afterward he saw the third Italian coming rapidly along the street toward him.

The fellow arrived at the corner and looked hastily around him, evidently surprised that his two companions were not there awaiting him.

He looked up and down the avenue, and then along the street. He opened the doors of two saloons and peered inside. Then he espied Chick, and approached him.

"You are the man who was across the river where they are fixing the road," he said, in his own language.

"Yes," replied Chick.

"You followed us across the ferry and on the car, didn't you?"

"I rode on the same ferryboat and on the same car; then I walked up the same street. Your friends accused me of following them. That is why they are not here," said Chick.

"Where are they?"

"They have been arrested."

"What?"

"It is true."

"But why?"

"Because they attacked me here on the corner. Then a policeman came. He arrested them and took them away."

"Why didn't he arrest you, too?"

"Because I was only defending myself. They attacked me. But the policeman won't take them very far. I explained to him."

"Who are you, and why should you follow us?" demanded the man.

"Bah; you are like others; like your friends. They wished to know the same thing. I never saw any of you before in my life until to-day. Why should I follow you? Is it because of the richness of your dress? Is it for the great wealth you carry on your person? Why should I, or another, follow *you?*"

The fellow shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Tell me which way my friends went, and I will go after them," he said.

"Wait here and they will come to you," replied Chick.

"Is that why you are waiting?" asked the man suspiciously.

"Yes."

"But why?"

"Because if the cop does not let them go, as he said he would, I will go to the station house and tell the man there that it was all a mistake. I do not want your friends arrested, even though they attacked me. But I do not blame them for that. I would do the same, perhaps, if I thought I was followed and spied upon."

"You speak English?"

"Yes."

"So do I. Ah! Look! They are coming now."

It was true.

Down the avenue, half a block away, the two Italians were rapidly making their way back again toward the corner where they were arrested; and as they drew nearer they saw their own friend, and Chick, standing there awaiting them.

They were laughing when they came up. One of them extended his hand toward Chick, who grasped it. It was the man who had felt the force of the detective's fist.

"You saved us," he said. "We might have gone to prison but for you."

"Yes," said Chick; "but I did not wish that."

"We are sorry we attacked you."

In the meantime the other one had been explaining to his friend all that had happened; and now the three of them turned toward Chick.

"We will be friends," said the man who had entered the house where the negroes were sitting on the steps; "but now we must part. We have business to attend to."

"Can't I help you?" asked Chick. "I would like something to do just now."

"No; it is impossible. But—if you live around this neighborhood, look out for us. It is possible that we may find something for you to do—if you are of the right sort."

He smiled meaningly as he said this, but Chick, for reasons of his own, did not appear to notice the significance of the smile. He replied:

"I am the right sort for anything that pays. If it has a little danger connected with it, so much the better."

"Very well. Watch out for us. We may meet again."

Chick followed them with his eyes as they went away down the avenue.

There was no necessity of following them, literally, he thought, since he had traced them to the house where one of them had evidently reported the occurrences that happened across the river. It was the *house* that needed attention just now.

He decided, too, to give it that attention without delay.

He hurried around to One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street and entered the Harlem branch of the Detective Bureau—and he encountered Detective Conroy, who was just leaving the place.

"Hello, Conroy," he said, in his natural tones. "I'm Chick; you needn't jump so. I'm not the dago I look to be."

"Hello, Chick. Glad to see you. What are you doing here?" was the quick reply.

"I'm looking for a place to crawl into for a few minutes while I change my personal appearance. Can you help me out?"

"Sure. Come ahead."

Conroy led him up the stairs and into the office, and, while the officers who were there watched the proceedings, Chick began rapid alterations in his appearance. He had left home prepared for an emergency of this sort, and he had with him all that was necessary for the character he intended now to fill.

No great change was necessary.

As the Italian laborer, he had made his skin very dark, and there was no need to add a deeper color to it. But he replaced the wig of long, straight hair, with another one of closely kinked wool, with a parting cut through the middle of it. He donned a pair of spectacles of common window glass. He turned his reversible coat the other side out. He shed the corduroy trousers he had worn, revealing the fact that there was another and a different-looking pair beneath them. He also threw away the cap he had worn, and took a soft hat from one of his pockets, and then he stood forth, a very respectable-looking negro.

"Is that the way you do it?" asked Conroy.

"Sometimes," was the smiling response.

"Well, it's all right. What are you after now, Chick? Perhaps I can help you."

"I shouldn't wonder if I might call upon you a little later on. If I need any help, you may be sure that I will call upon you."

"All right. You'll find me ready any time."

They parted at the street door again, and Chick at once took his way back again to One Hundred and Thirty-third Street, and toward the house he had seen the Italian enter not so very long ago.

He did not in the least resemble the man who had followed that Italian to the doorway, but he looked precisely what he was pretending to represent—a very respectable negro. He stopped in front of the steps where the other negroes were still seated, and, addressing one of them, said:

"Are there any rooms to let in this house? I sure would like to find one that suits me."

"I reckon so," was the reply. "I'll see."

Chick followed him through the doorway.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEN OF A HUMAN TIGER.

It is necessary now that we should leave Chick for a time, to follow the fortunes of Lucia, in her capacity of assistant, and in her disguise as an Italian youth.

It will be remembered that when she parted with Chick the preceding afternoon, her errand was to go to the Tombs and interview Lacava, with the hope that, assisted by her previous information concerning him and the men with whom he had formerly consorted, she would be enabled to glean a still further understanding from him about the men who were now attempting to victimize Salvatore Volpe.

Her interview with Lacava was, however, not so satisfactory as she could have hoped.

She found her former lieutenant to be morose and sullen to a degree; and she was obliged, during that interview, to be exceedingly guarded, lest he should penetrate her disguise.

That would not only have been fatal to her plans; it might have proved fatal to herself as well, for, if Lacava had suspected her identity, he would at once have found a way to get word outside the prison to his fellows, and they would have killed her with as little regret as they would a mosquito that stung them.

In her character as Luigi, she pretended, of course, that she had been sent to Lacava by his friends, to do what might be done for him while he languished in the Tombs.

But he was suspicious; and he told her so frankly; and she was obliged to leave him, at last, little better off in the way of information than when she went there.

Still, there was one thing that she had gained. Lacava, in their talk, did refer to a house in One Hundred and Thirty-third Street. Not by number, but merely to the house itself, as located in that street.

Now, the street extends from the East River to the North River; and there is an east and a west section of it; and she did not know, and could not guess, on which side of the city the particular house she wished to find was located.

Nevertheless, she determined to make the attempt.

When she left the Tombs, she walked quite slowly for a distance while she thought on the matter.

She knew perfectly well that Chick would not consent to her taking the trip to Harlem, alone, on any such investigation; but she wished particularly to do it, the better to demonstrate her fitness for the work she had elected to perform in the service of Nick Carter.

Thus it was that, instead of sending word to Chick, or going to the house to see him, as she doubtless should have done, she returned to her own home, and there wrote the note which we have seen Pietro deliver. Then she started, alone, for Harlem.

Remember, she was disguised.

Don't forget that, in her disguise, she represented a young man, an Italian; and recollect, also, what we have frequently heard her say; that when she was acting a certain character, she felt and lived that particular character. We will understand, then, how it was that she dared to undertake what she did.

The quickest way to reach Harlem from that part of the city where she made her start was via the subway, and her common sense told her that she should take the Lenox Avenue branch of the road, rather than the Broadway line; and so, you see, that the great artery of the city formed by the subway materially aided her in approaching directly the destination she sought.

Naturally, she left the train at the One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street station, since it was One Hundred and Thirty-third Street that she sought. As naturally she walked down the avenue until she arrived at the corner of One Hundred and Thirty-third Street.

There she paused at the northwest corner, doubting which way to turn; whether to go toward the East Side or toward the West Side.

She was pretending to smoke a cigarette—which she hated—the better to carry off the character she was playing; and she stood there on the corner, puffing idly at it, when, by the merest chance, the information she sought came to her.

Two men turned the corner into One Hundred and

Thirty-third Street, walking rapidly; and, as they passed quite near to her, she caught a part of one sentence, spoken in Italian, and in an undertone; but it was enough to put her instantly on the alert.

The part of a sentence that she heard was: "—and Volpe will pay, when——"

There was no more of it; but it was enough. At least, she considered it so, for there was the name of the intended victim, and the words, "will pay." Surely they could have referred to nothing else than the very case upon which she was engaged.

Lucia half turned and watched the two men as they passed rapidly along the street; and one of them turned completely around and looked back at that moment, as if to see if he were followed. She was positive that she herself had not attracted the attention of either of the parties.

But she gave a gasp of surprise when she saw the face of that man.

It was only a few hours since she had seen Lacava in the Tombs; and yet she could have sworn that the man who turned around and looked back was he.

Then the explanation of the phenomenon came upon her.

"It is Dominico Lacava's brother," she said to herself, under her breath: "It is he—it must be—who was in prison at Sing Sing. Doubtless he has been liberated lately, and is now at large again. At all events, that must have been Filipo Lacava, the brother."

She started instantly to follow after the two men.

Her knowledge of Black Hand methods told her as plainly as words could have done that Filipo Lacava, at liberty, released from prison, would not long be without allying himself with one or another of the Black Hand societies. By following him, therefore, she would certainly be taken to one of the groups, even though it might not be to the particular one she was seeking.

The two men had not gone far into the street before they ascended steps to one of the houses, and entered, disappearing from view.

Lucia stopped in her tracks, and a moment later retraced her steps to the corner, in order to have time to think out what was best to do.

Through a window of the store on the corner she could see the face of a clock. The hands pointed to a quarter past nine—too early in the evening, she thought, for her to venture much farther——

She paused there in her thoughts, and smiled.

"I have it," she told herself. "I know what to do to gain admittance among them. It will be a bold trick to play, and if Filipo Lacava has already communicated with his brother in the Tombs, the fact will betray me instantly. But if, on the other hand, he has not done so, I may hope to succeed. It is worth the risk. I will try it."

She had already observed enough about the neighborhood to realize that she was in a negro quarter of the city rather than in an Italian one. Negroes were everywhere around her, and some of them, particularly the women, stared at the seeming Italian youth, as if he had no right to be there.

But Lucia's mind was now made up regarding what she would attempt to do, and so, after another moment of hesitation, she walked boldly along the street until she arrived at the steps she had seen the two men ascend.

There were several negroes seated there—just as they were the following day when Chick visited that neighborhood; just as they always are when the weather will permit—and, pausing before them, she addressed the one nearest to her.

"Italians live here? in this house?" she inquired, in very imperfect English, but rendering her words plain enough to be understood.

"Uh, huh; top floor," replied the negro. "Right-hand side, dago."

"Name Lacava? No?" She asked again.

"The name is Faccini; but there may be a Lacava that goes there; I dunno," said the negro. "There's half a dozen or more of them up there now. I can't remember their names."

But the information was sufficient for Lucia. The name, Faccini, had told her all she desired to know for the moment. It meant much, in fact, for she knew it to be the name of the man who had been leader among the Black Hand group of men with whom Dominico Lacava had worked before he came to her in Grove Street.

Fortune had favored her. She had struck upon the right trail without any particular effort. She felt that it portended good for her; and, without an instant of hesitation, she made her way past the negroes seated upon the steps, entered the hallway, and began to mount the stairs toward the top of the building.

Lucia had already decided what she would say when she should rap at the door on the top floor of that house; and when she arrived before it, she gave the summons loudly and distinctly, as if she were not at all doubtful of the outcome of her venture.

No one could have known better than Lucia did that,

in entering that place, she was literally taking her life in her hand. If those men inside that room where she knocked should suspect for an instant the real purport of her errand, they would not hesitate to take quick and terrible vengeance upon her for her temerity.

For a time after she rapped upon the door there was silence, and finally she repeated the summons, this time even more peremptorily than before; and, after a moment, the door swung slowly ajar.

It revealed a darkened room beyond, and in the darkness there was silence. A man stood in the partly opened doorway looking out. He was scowling, and his entire aspect was forbidding in the extreme.

"What do you want?" he demanded quickly, in Italian; for of course he could see at a single glance that the youth who faced him was of his own country.

"I want Faccini," she replied boldly.

"I am Faccini—but I don't know you."

"I am Luigi Donatello," said Lucia, selecting the first name that came to her; and it was the surname of the great Donatello in whose undoing she had been chiefly instrumental.*

"Still, I do not know you," said the man forbiddingly.

"I know that; but you know my uncle—Raphael Donatello. If you are Faccini, you are known to him."

"Do you come to me from him?" Faccini asked, with a leer.

"No."

"From whom, then?"

"I come from Dominico Lacava, now in the Tombs, to find Filipo Lacava, his brother; and he sent me here to you for that purpose," was the cool reply.

For a moment Faccini stared at Lucia in silence. Then he flung wide the door, and with a cruel smile on his face, said:

"Come inside. You have ventured too far now to turn back without—without completing your errand."

Lucia walked boldly through the doorway, and the door was instantly closed and locked behind her.

The two were in total darkness then, and at once Lucia felt the grip of Faccini as he seized her by the arm, shutting down upon it until he hurt her sorely.

"Huh!" he grunted. "You have the arm of a girl, not of a man. Tell me what errand you have with Filipo Lacava. Tell me what message was sent here, to this house, by Dominico."

"My message is for Filipo," she replied coldly. "I was told to give it to him; but if you are Faccini, you have the right to hear it first; only, as yet, I do not *know* that you *are* Faccini. Prove that to me and I will tell you the message."

For reply, the man laughed aloud. Then he thrust Lucia forward and threw open a second door, thus admitting them to a lighted room, in which were seated half a dozen others, who, doubtless, had overheard every word that had already been said.

"Deliver your message to Filipo Lacava, if you see him here," said Faccini, with another laugh.

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*See Case 657.

CHAPTER IX.

LUCIA PUTS HERSELF IN DANGER.

A quick glance from face to face among the men who were seated there assured Lucia that Filipo Lacava was not among them; for, although she had never seen the man in her life, save for that one glimpse of him she had had on the street, a very little while ago, she knew of the strong resemblance between the brothers.

But *was* the man she had seen on the street Filipo Lacava? Was it possible that she had been deceived? that she had witlessly deceived herself?

For a moment, as she looked around that room and discovered that the face she sought was not there, she was startled to think that perhaps Filipo Lacava was still in Sing Sing, and that in pretending she had a message for him from his brother, she had thrust herself into a predicament from which there was only one doorway of escape—death.

Faccini watched her in the meantime with the eyes of a basilisk.

The others watched her, too, and with a oneness of expression which boded ill for her.

They felt that this youth had thrust himself among them without bidding; and their business was such that it admitted of the presence of no strangers.

"Well?" demanded Faccini, showing his white teeth and watching Lucia with the glittering eyes of a cat about to spring.

"I have never seen Filipo Lacava," Lucia replied calmly. "I do not know him. Dominico told me that I could make no mistake about him, however, since they are so much alike that I would think I saw *him* again. So the man I seek is not here."

"Do you guess where he is?" demanded Faccini.

Lucia shrugged her shoulders. She did not attempt to reply.

"He is in Sing Sing prison, where he has been staying for three years past."

Lucia shrugged again, and turned so that she faced the door by which she had entered.

"In that case I have no errand here," she said. "To-morrow, when I can visit the Tombs again, I will tell Dominico what you say. He will be surprised. He thought his brother was here."

"Wait. Why did he suppose his brother was here?"

"I do not know. He did not think it necessary to tell me that."

"What was the message you were to deliver to Filipo?"

"Since he is not here to receive it, it becomes no message at all."

"Nevertheless, you will tell *me* what it was."

Faccini did not raise his voice when he said this. He did not perceptibly alter the expression of his face or manner, but there was a something indefinite behind the words he used, which was so full of menace, that a shudder went through Lucia.

She realized, in that instant, the utter cruelty and implacability of the man; his absolute indifference to the sufferings of others, if his own desires were accomplished. She decided, on the spot, to deliver the message she had created for the occasion to Faccini.

"The message," she said, without a perceptible pause, "was to tell Filipo that his brother Dominico is now in the Tombs; that serious charges are against him, and it is likely that he will be sent to prison for a long term, unless he can escape. I was to tell him, also, that Dominico is sorry for his part of the quarrel between them, and begs the forgiveness of his brother."

A door which communicated with a room beyond opened quickly, and a man in whom Lucia at once recognized Filipo Lacava stood on the threshold.

"I am Filipo Lacava," he said slowly, and with his piercing eyes fixed intently upon the face of Lucia. "How did my brother guess that I am here instead of at Sing Sing?"

"I do not know."

"It is dangerous to know where I am just at present, boy. I did not serve my time out. I have escaped. I was sent, with others, to work on the new prison in the mountains, and I escaped. I am here. How Dominico could have guessed it I do not know."

"Perhaps he heard that you had escaped and guessed where you would go to hide."

"Perhaps. But—who are you?"

"Luigi Donatello."

"The name tells me nothing."

Lucia shrugged her shoulders.

"What are you to my brother? How is it that he selected you for such a secret errand as that which brought you here."

"I have been his friend; that is all. There was a place, downtown, where we met often, and got to know each other. Sometimes we were engaged upon the same sort of work, and at such times we learned to know each other better."

"Where was that? Where was the house in which you often met my brother?"

"There were two houses where we met. One was in Grove Street—it has been destroyed by fire now; the other was where he lived in South Fifth Avenue."

"Have you delivered all the message that my brother sent to me?"

"No. There is more."

"Tell me the rest of it."

"That which remains concerns myself most."

"Concerns *you?*"

"Yes."

"How is that?"

"Business has been dull of late. Since the fire in Grove Street I have been out of a job. Dominico desired that, for his sake, you would recommend me to Faccini, in whom, he said, I would find a man who could secure work for me quickly, if I pleased him."

Lacava glanced toward Faccini, and Faccini returned the look.

They both understood perfectly well what sort of work their uninvited guest was referring to; but they remembered Petrosino, and how well that martyr used to play the characters he assumed. They recalled how often he had deceived men of their own kind, and how many of them he had sent to prison and to the electric chair.

Could it be possible that this apparently harmless young man was another Petrosino?

No; it was not possible; and yet there might be another who would try to emulate what he had done; and these men were ever on their guard against such a thing.

Again, how had Dominico Lacava heard of the escape of his brother from the prison guards?

These were some of the thoughts that occurred to the several men who confronted Lucia in that stuffy room; to those particular two who questioned her.

Lucia saw and recognized the doubts that assailed them. She knew that they were half inclined to be-

lieve her, and yet were wholly suspicious—a paradox that was perfectly understandable to her.

Yet she had played her part so well thus far that she had left nothing definite upon which any of the men could put a finger of outspoken suspicion.

"Will they permit me to go away again, or will they detain me here until they investigate all that I have said?" she asked herself, in thought; and she was inclined to believe that the latter would be the case.

After all, what had she gained by going there?

She had known as much as she knew now, when the negro outside, on the steps, had admitted to her that one Faccini lived in the house. She knew, then, that she had found the nest where the Black Hand group, who were pursuing Volpe, had their headquarters.

Lucia realized, when it was too late, that she should have gone away then and taken the information to Chick.

But her eagerness to accomplish something alone, her desire to do things unaided, had led her on, until now she realized that she had walked into a situation from which it would be difficult to extricate herself, in which there were dangers on every side.

Suppose they should discover that she was a woman instead of a young man, as she appeared.

Her face blanched at the thought, and the watchful eyes of Faccini saw the sudden pallor.

But he made no comment, even if he did take mental note of the fact.

Lucia knew that if once they should suspect her real identity—and they would not be long in doing that if they should find out that she was a woman—her span of life would be a short one, indeed.

But the last part of the message she had delivered was significant to them.

Once upon a time Dominico Lacava had been a valued assistant in their nefarious employment. It was natural that he should turn back to them, after having been betrayed by those others to whom he had gone, after severing his associations with this crowd. It was likewise natural that he should send such a message as had been brought by this youth—if, indeed, he *had* sent it.

There was the crux.

Had Dominico done so, or was this a cleverly laid plot, worthy of another Petrosino, to wring admissions from them which would result in their undoing?

One should understand the suspicious qualities of the Italian character, as connected with these perpetrators of the Black Hand outrages, to comprehend thoroughly the present situation.

No class of people in all the world are so suspicious. There is never a time when they entirely trust even their associates in crime. They know that the very man who assists one of them in the actual commission of a crime will, perhaps, be the first to turn traitor if there is hope of recompense in so doing.

How do they know this? By the best rule possible to imagine, for each one knows that he would himself willingly become a traitor to the others if there were promises of sufficient reward for the act.

And this fact, if the police but realized it, is the best available weapon that is at hand to use against the Black Hand.

Suddenly Faccini took up the conversation again.

"You say you are Raphael Donatello's nephew," he said. "I have never heard that he has a brother, and I know him well."

"Yet he may have had a brother unknown to you," replied Lucia.

"You say you are Luigi. What was your father's name?"

"Salvatore."

"I have never heard of such."

Lucia shrugged her shoulders and turned out the palms of her hands deprecatingly.

Faccini turned to Filipo Lacava.

"What do you say?" he asked. "What disposition shall we make of this young man? You are the one who is most concerned. There will be a hue and cry after you to-morrow, when it is widely known that you have escaped. This boy may have been sent out by the police. If that is true, he should be killed without mercy. Again, he may be what he says he is, a messenger from Dominico. It is for you to say, Filipo. What shall we do with him?"

One of the men who had not spoken till then now raised his voice.

"Let him remain here, under guard, until we investigate," he said. "To-morrow, Faccini himself can go to see Dominico at the Tombs. We will know the truth then. If this boy is what he represents himself to be, all right; if he is not——!"

The pause was intensely significant.

Without more words, Faccini crossed to the door through which Filipo had appeared upon the scene, and, standing upon the threshold, beckoned to Lucia.

She knew then that she was to be detained. She knew, also, that it would be utter folly for her to attempt resistance in any form.

And so she followed Faccini from the room.

The time was midnight, preceding the arrival of Chick in that quarter of the city after his trip to the opposite side of the Hudson River.

CHAPTER X.

DISCOVERY WOULD MEAN DEATH.

The house where Faccini lived was a five-storied flat house, and Faccini occupied the top floor. It was seven rooms deep, and the room to which the man now conducted Lucia was the dark and windowless room in the middle of it.

The only opening from that room, aside from the door by which she entered it, was a skylight at the top, and far above her head. The room itself was entirely destitute of furniture. Indeed, it had the appearance of not being used at all.

When they stepped into it, Faccini left her there alone for a moment, but he returned at once, bearing a thin mattress, which he threw upon the floor without comment.

"You will remain here until we have investigated," he said, with his hand upon the door. "You will be a prisoner, and outside the door there will be a guard. That is all. You cannot escape, even if you try; but if you should *try*, we will not wait to finish the investigation. You understand me?"

"Yes."

"If you are all that you claim to be, we will be glad to have you among us, for you have a manner and an address which will be valuable to us."

He paused, regarded her attentively for a moment, and made as if to leave the room; but he halted and stepped inside again, closing the door behind him.

"Did you know Lucia Deluzzio?" he asked her abruptly. Deluzzio was the name by which Lucia had been known to the Black Hand. She wondered if she paled at all at the sudden question.

"I knew about her," Lucia replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I have the right to ask you any question that occurs to me. You look very much like that brother of hers who died in the hospital. Had you heard about him, also?"

"Yes."

The man stared at her for another full minute in utter silence. Then he said:

"Donatello may be seen in his prison cell, also. I shall send there to know if he has a nephew. Possibly he will tell us about you."

"Send to him, by all means, if you can," she retorted.

Faccini took a step nearer to her, and, bending a little forward, he said in a tone that was low and menacing:

"My inclination is to kill you now and make the investigation afterward. I am more than half a mind to do it."

He paused, fingering the hilt of a concealed weapon that he wore, hidden, somewhere. Lucia faced him unflinchingly.

She knew it to be the crucial moment. If she should falter now, the man would strike; and after it he would go to the others, and, with a shrug of his massive shoulders, tell what he had done.

But she neither flinched nor faltered. She looked into Faccini's eyes with unmoved countenance and steady gaze; and after a moment he turned away.

"For so slight and so young a person, you have courage," he said grumblingly. "For your own sake and ours, I hope you are what you pretend to be."

He left the room then, locking the door securely after him, and Lucia found herself alone in a windowless room that was not more than eight feet square.

High above her head, far beyond her reach, was the skylight of glass, but no ladder led up to it. There was no way of reaching it. Lucia did not know that there was a way of escape beyond it, even if it could be reached.

Yes; she was already thinking of flight from that place, for she realized, when it was too late, that it was necessary that she should escape if she hoped to save her own life.

She had not counted upon their going to Dominico Lacava, and to Raphael Donatello as well, to investigate the truth or the falsity of the story she had told.

But she knew there were plenty of agents whom they could send to either place. She knew that by the time another night had come they would have seen and talked with those men, and her deception would be discovered.

She supposed that in such a case they would even guess her identity; would guess that she was the woman who had once been chief over a group of their own kind in the house in Grove Street.

She raised her eyes and studied the skylight above her head.

It was fully ten feet away from her.

Faccini had left her no sort of light; only the stars shining in the heavens showed her where that skylight was located. She realized, too, that the men outside would perhaps look in upon her again before they separated for the night—if, indeed, they should be inclined to part at all.

With a sigh she threw herself upon the old mattress that Faccini had brought to her, and closed her eyes; not to sleep, for sleep had never been further from her; but to think the better, and the more consecutively.

For an hour or more she remained perfectly still, and then she heard a soft movement outside the door of her room, and she knew that, at least, one of the men—probably Faccini himself—was returning.

Had the man come to kill her in her sleep? It would be the easiest and the simplest way for him to solve a perplexing problem.

The door opened softly; so softly that she heard no sound after that first soft rubbing against the door.

She could see nothing at first, but at last, between her and the skylight above, she saw the vague outlines of a man bending over her: and she recognized, by those outlines, Faccini.

Lucia saw him only dimly, for she did not dare to open her eyes, but just barely parted the lids, peering between them. She wished Faccini to believe that she was sleeping.

To that end she breathed regularly; then she stirred uneasily, as if even in her sleep she was subconsciously aware of the presence of another. It is a mistake when one wishes to simulate sleep not to move at all. A slight, natural movement of the body is much more convincing in that respect.

Faccini bent closely over her and listened to her breathing. She saw him insert one hand under the lapel of his coat, and she knew that he was feeling for his ever-present stiletto; and it was with difficulty, then, that she compelled herself to apparent unconsciousness of his presence, for she really supposed for the moment that he had come there to kill her.

But after a moment he stood erect again. Then, as silently as he had come, he went away, and she heard the soft closing of the door, followed by the turning of the key in the lock, to denote that he had gone.

She understood, then, why he had come.

It had been to assure himself that she slept; to convince himself that the youth—the supposed youth—was so satisfied of his own safety among them that he could sleep, even with the threat of investigation on the morrow hanging over his head.

She understood, also, that she was not likely to be disturbed again that night; and that the meeting upon which she had intruded had broken up for the time being.

One of the men would doubtless sleep on the floor near the door to the room she was occupying; but he would sleep!

She crept softly from her pallet and to the door. She laid her ear against the crack between door and sill. She could hear the almost noiseless arrangements for a man to sleep there, and she listened on and on, until the sound of steady breathing told her that the man on guard, whoever he was, slept.

Again she looked toward the skylight, ten feet above her head, and she knew there was no hope of reaching it; nor was there hope of passing out by the door, even if it were unlocked—which it was not.

Then she thrust her hands deeply into the trousers pockets, precisely as a man would, or might have done, under the circumstances; and she started quickly.

It will be remembered that, in adopting the disguise she wore as a man, she had borrowed some of Tony's clothing. She had taken the first suit of clothing she could put her hands on.

Now, as she stuck her hands into the pockets of the trousers, she came upon some loose change, a penknife, and a bunch of three keys.

These were nothing of themselves, but they were something in the way of suggestion.

They informed her that there were other pockets in that suit of clothes, the contents of which she did not know. She investigated further.

Did you ever stop to count the number of pockets the average man carries about with him every day? It is interesting.

Counting the maximum number, there will be six in the waistcoat; six more in the coat, if the change pocket is counted, and five in the trousers. Seventeen pockets! Think of it! Think of the possibilities of seventeen unsearched pockets—pockets which belonged by right to a boy of not quite seventeen years; to a boy, also, who was lately arrived in the country, and to whom all things American were strange; for such was Tony Beninato, now at school.

Lucia began her search of the pockets feverishly, and she found wonderful things among Tony's treasures.

A tiny pistol of 22-calibre, unloaded. There were no cartridges to go with it. She laid it aside. A pocket knife with a dirk-shaped blade three inches long, which opened by a thumb spring at the back, and which was as sharp as a razor. Another knife that is a novelty to every boy—a combination knife, having among its wonderful implements a corkscrew, a gimlet, a gouge for cleaning a horse's hoof, a pair of tiny and useless scissors, a big blade and a little blade, a tiny screwdriver. A fish line. A small, tin box filled with wax matches.

There were other things, too, which need not be itemized, being of no interest.

In fact, there was only one thing there that greatly interested Lucia at the moment, and that was the combination knife-and-tool instrument.

She returned *all* the other things to the pockets where she found them, retaining only that in her grasp—that and the box of wax matches.

With one of the vestas she examined the lock on the door—and she found it to be the plainest, most ordinary kind of a lock; not mortised into the door, but screwed upon it on the inside. You can see such locks attached to the inner doors of the cheaper and older houses of New York.

Well, there was now a way of escape from the room.

With the small screwdriver in the combination knife, she could easily remove the lock from the door that barred her way of escape; but beyond that door a man was sleeping, stretched upon the floor.

Could she remove that lock without waking the sleeper? If she should succeed in doing that much, could she hope to step over his prostrate form and pass out of the flat without arousing him, or without disturbing some other person in the flat?

She recalled how silently Faccini had entered the room. The fact reminded her that the door did not creak on its hinges, anyhow. She could open it, and perhaps close it again, without the slightest noise. But could she turn the screws, and remove them, without noise?

It is haste which spoils more plans than any other one thing. Haste makes noise; moderation and care rarely do so.

To perform an act such as Lucia contemplated at that moment, one must move with the caution, mod-

eration, and precision of the minute hand of a watch; all things must be done gently but firmly.

Remembering these simple rules, Lucia braced herself for the work, and began, knowing well that discovery would mean death.

CHAPTER XI.

A MIGHTY CLOSE CALL.

A thousand pages of written description could not give an idea of the many phases of panic through which Lucia passed during the following hour and a half, for all of that time was consumed in the mere removal of the lock from the door.

Three or four times, when she could not avoid making some little noise at her work, she returned to the pallet, and noiselessly stretched herself upon it, waiting and listening.

But the sleeper outside the door was not disturbed, and each time she began her work again with renewed courage.

And at last the lock came off, loose in her grasp, and she laid it gently aside.

There was now no latch or fastening of any sort upon the door. She had only to open it in order to pass from the room.

But to do so she must pass over the sleeping form on the floor. Would the board on which she would put her foot beyond him creak? The answer to that question meant life or death to Lucia.

But why ask it at all, since the effort must be made?

Gathering her inward forces, almost holding her breath, she pulled the door open, and peered into the darkness beyond.

Darkness? No; not quite. A dim light was burning somewhere. She could not see the light itself, but a reflection from it cast a faint glow through the darkness of the hall of the flat, and permitted her to see her way; to see the outlines of the sleeping man at her feet.

He had not moved. Apparently he had not been disturbed since she began her work. He was breathing heavily and regularly, and the odor of stale beer told of an incentive to sleep that he had taken before retiring.

Yet, she knew that the faintest sound would rouse him, nevertheless.

She was thankful in that moment that she did not wear skirts. After all, there is some advantage in the costume of a man. She had already removed her shoes and thrust them into the side pockets of her coat; and now, in her stockinged feet, she moved slowly forward, adopting the same slow method of procedure she had used in removing the lock from the door.

The man was lying sprawled upon the floor. His head was turned to one side and rested upon one crooked arm; the other arm was curled over his head.

She opened the clasp knife, determined to use it if necessity should arise; and then, with a silent prayer in her heart, she made the advance.

As lightly as a fawn she stepped over the prostrate figure, pausing for an instant astride of it; then she drew the other foot after her. There she paused a moment, and waited. The man did not move. The worst part of the adventure was passed.

Again she made a step forward, waited, brought up the other foot, stepped out with that one, waited, moved another step forward, waited; and so again and again she repeated that procedure, waiting between each half step, scarcely breathing at all, trying to still her heartbeats, which seemed the noisiest movements in the house just then. And so, step by step, advanced along the hall, away from the door of that room where she had been confined; away from the man sleeping outside it; toward the way of escape from the house.

She knew perfectly well where the outer door was located. She remembered that since her coming to the flat.

Once, as she passed so slowly along the hall, she encountered an open door, and beyond it could hear the faint snoring of an individual. She waited there for quite a time before she ventured to pass; but she finally did so in safety.

Then the outer door.

She turned the knob, pulled the door open, passed out; closed the door softly behind her; knew that the latch was in place; knew that she had not made a sound; knew that she was at last outside that terrible flat, and that the unbarred way to the street was open before her—and she fled down the stairs like a sprite.

There were three flights. The house was a four-storied one. She stopped at the top of the first flight from the ground, and put on the shoes, lacing them with care, though hastily; and then, with more assurance than she had yet experienced that night, she started down the last flight of stairs to the street.

She reached the door, opened it, stepped outside—and almost ran into the arms of Faccini.

A light, blazing in the vestibule, rendered the two plainly visible to each other, and the recognition was instant and mutual.

Faccini uttered a short, quick cry, and reached for a weapon. Lucia cried out, also, and struck with the weapon she held in her right hand, for she had retained it in her grasp, even while she was lacing the shoes.

Faccini leaped back out of the way of the blow, but not quite far enough. The blade of the knife ripped his coat sleeve and scratched his right arm, so that he uttered another cry, believing himself worse injured than he was. In reality he was not injured at all.

But the blow was sufficient to afford her an opportunity to leap past him, through the vestibule, and she took advantage of it.

In another instant she was speeding away through the street as fast as her feet could carry her, but with Faccini in full pursuit.

Lucia had, perhaps, thirty feet the start of the man, but she speedily saw that he could outrun her. She knew that he would overtake her presently, and that against his great strength she would be helpless.

As she ran forward, a house door opened just ahead of her. A negro stepped from the entrance, and before he could realize what was taking place, she had leaped upon the steps beside him, passed him, and was inside the house.

"Help me!" she cried to him as she passed; and she did not wait to see what he would do, but ran up the stairs of the building, two steps at a time, and came plump upon a negress at the top of them.

"Save me! Hide me!" she cried out; and, even as she made the request, she could hear loud voices at the lower door, which told her that the negro had stopped Faccini for a moment, at least, while he inquired what was the matter. Perhaps it would give her time to escape.

"What's de mattah, honey?" the negress demanded.

"A man is chasing me. He will kill me if he catches me," Lucia replied pantingly. Now that the worst of her dangers were past, she was in something of a panic.

"Has you done swiped his bank roll, honey?" asked the woman.

"No, no, no, no! I have stolen nothing. It is he who is the thief. Hide me," replied Lucia.

"Shuah, chile! I done reckon dat Pete'll hold him a lil while. You come with me."

The woman turned through an open door that was near at hand, and Lucia followed. The negress closed the outer door, opened an inner one, and shoved Lucia through it.

"You stay in dar," she commanded. "I'll go back outside and see what's happenin'. Is he a sure nuff bad man what's chasin' you, honey?"

But she didn't wait for a reply; and a moment later Lucia could hear loud voices in the outer hall. She heard the negress telling some one—Faccini, of course—that "Sure there was a young man runned past her up the stairs. Dunno whar he went, nohow. Reckon to de roof. Dere's a scuttle up dar what he kin get out of;" and she heard Faccini's steps on the other stairs, ascending rapidly.

Then the voice of the negro whom Lucia had encountered at the front door.

"Whar'd he go, mammy?" the man asked.

"Dunno, chile. Reckon he runned straight up through de roof. Reckon he's done gone up to de stars in de sky. Now, you go 'long, Pete, or you'll be late to your work."

"But that feller; he was a dago—one of that bunch that lives down the street—maybe he'll come back," expostulated her son.

"Look a heah, Pete, chile, you leave dat man to yo' ole mammy. I sure kin take care of him. He ain't goin' for to molest me, nohow. You go 'long 'bout yo' business. Hark. Git erlong, Pete; de dago am comin' back now."

Lucia heard Pete descend the stairs in obedience to his mother's orders. Then she heard the approach of Faccini; and she heard more.

"Where is he?" demanded Faccini, in good English. "He didn't go out on the roof. Have you seen him?"

The negress laughed gleefully.

"Sure I has seen him," she exclaimed. "I reckon he was hidin' somewhere on de next flo', an' yo' done walked straight past him. He come down like he was shot out uh a gun, and he hiked through de do' to the street. You go chase him if yo' want to. Chase yo'self, anyhow!"

There was a short silence after that, and presently the negress reëntered the little flat that she called home.

"Hush, chile," she whispered through the doorway into the room where Lucia was hiding. "It ain't safe fo' yo' to show yo'self yet. Jes wait where yo' are till I come back."

But Lucia would not wait. She followed the negress to the front room of the flat, where the kind-hearted black woman hung for a time out of the window, watching the street below.

"I jes reckon you've got to stay here for a time an' be my company," she said at last, returning to the interior of the room and closing the window. "Dat man is waitin' outside on de curb; and two mo' have come dere with him. Reckon they've got it in fo' you, chile. What yo' been doin'?"

"Nothing. He is a Black Hand man," said Lucia, believing that to be the best answer she could make under the circumstances.

"Fo' de land sakes! Well, now, ain't it lucky dat Pete has to go to wuk at fo' in de mawnin', chile? I has ter git up and git his brekfust; I sure does. Only for that, you wouldn't ha' been able to git inside. I done reckon dat yo's got ter be my company fo' today, honey."

And so it proved.

Faccini, deceived for a time by the negress into the belief that his prey had returned to the street, thought differently after he had gone farther in pursuit. He evidently was now convinced that the youth whom he sought had taken refuge somewhere inside that house, and was therefore determined to wait outside until he came out again.

With two of his followers he camped on the door-steps, and waited.

Daylight came, and other hours passed, and still the men waited outside; and Lucia, as the hour of eight approached, became uneasy, recalling the fact that she had an appointment to keep with Chick.

But the Italians did not relinquish their vigilance.

"Isn't there some way in which I can get out of the house?" Lucia asked the negress at last, when the latter brought her a cup of steaming coffee.

"Not unless yo' go by de roof," was the reply. "Yo' jes wait till I go up there an' take a look outside."

She went away, but presently she returned.

"Tain't no sort uh use," she said, with emphasis. "Dere's two more uh dem camped on de roof outside, and they done seed me, too. Reckon they knows yo' is in here somewhere. Reckon yo'd better lie down an' take a nap. Yo' sure does look as if yo' needed one. An' after that——"

"Well, what after that?" asked Lucia impatiently.

"I was thinkin'. Yo' sure does look like yo' was a gal, or might ha' been one. Mebby, bimeby, yo' could dress up in woman's clothes and go out. Mine's too big fo' yo', but I done got a niece on de top flo' who could lend yo' some. Think yo' could do de act, honey?"

"Yes, indeed, I could."

"Well, yo' lay down an' take a nap fo' an hour. I don't want to wake Lizzie jes yet. I reckon she ain't been to bed mo'n three hours. But when she wakes up, I'll sure git some of her clothes fo' you."

And so, while Chick was awaiting Lucia at eight that morning, she was quietly resting in the home of the good-natured negress, where she had fled for protection.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAPTURE.

It will be remembered that Chick followed a negro into the same house where the Italians had their flat, having intimated that he was in search of a furnished room; but before the two had begun to mount the stairs Chick came to a stop. A man was coming down the stairs toward them; a man who was not a negro, but an Italian.

Chick waited until he had passed them and gone outside the house. Then he said, addressing the negro:

"Who was that? Do Italians live in this house?"

"Yes; on de top flo'," was the reply.

"I don't like 'em, nohow," said Chick.

"No mo' do I, sah."

"Black Handers, the whole bunch," said Chick.

"Sure thing. I wish they was out uh here. There's mo'n a dozen of them stay on the top flo' most uh the time. Reckon they ain't up to no good, nohow. That was the boss just went out. Faccini's his name. He's a bad man, if ever there was one. Last night there was a fine-lookin' young chap—didn't look like he belonged to them, nohow—went up to their flat, and he ain't never come down again. Reckon he's there now, if they ain't killed him. He done asked me about the place; asked for Faccini, too."

That information was sufficient for Chick. He leaped at once to the conclusion that the young man referred to was no other than Lucia; and then, with one of his sudden inspirations, he took the negro into his confidence. He told him who and what he was, and why he was there; and he found the young negro ready and willing to assist him.

"We will go right up to that top floor and take a look at it," he said, in conclusion. "I won't stop for ceremony, if you think he is there now."

"Well, I don't know as to dat. I ain't scarcely left the do'step all the time, only for a few hours' sleep. The young man might ha' come out den. I dunno as to dat. But they can't be more than one or two of dem dagoes in the flat now; most of dem has gone out."

They climbed to the top of the house, rapidly and noiselessly. Chick rapped upon the door, and got no answer. He rapped again with the same result, and still waited; but at last he tried the door, finding that it was locked.

"I'm going inside," he said to the negro.

"How? The do' is locked."

"I'll show you," replied Chick, and produced his picklock.

The door yielded quickly to his manipulation, and he passed inside, followed by the negro. The flat was unoccupied, as the negro had supposed it would be, and a quick search through it disclosed the fact that Lucia was not there, at least.

But in the room that Lucia had entered when she faced the several men at once—the dining room of the flat—there was a locked desk, and, after picking the lock, Chick proceeded to examine the contents.

Almost the first thing he discovered was a half-finished letter, written in Italian, and bearing at the top an outline of a black hand.

More than that, it was addressed to the man, Volpe; and it read, when translated:

"You did not keep the appointment. You have not paid the money. To-morrow you must be at the same place at the same time with *six* thousand dollars, or before the day following your oldest daughter will have disappeared. We will take her from you, and you will never see her again, whether you pay the money or not, afterward. This is the last letter——"

It ended abruptly at that point, as if the writer had been called away before it was completed, as he doubtless had been.

Chick folded the sheet of paper and put it in his pocket. It was sufficient evidence to connect these men with the Volpe outrage.

He had turned toward the outer door, followed by the negro, when the sound of footsteps in the hallway arrested him. He could also hear voices speaking in Italian, although he could not catch the words.

"Quick!" he said. "Get in here!" and he thrust the negro into the same small room where Lucia had been held as a prisoner, and from which she had so cleverly escaped; and then, as he pushed the door shut—the lock and catch were still missing from it, as Lucia had left it—the outer door opened, and two men entered.

Chick could hear them talking together excitedly in their own language; and by their conversation he speedily understood that these men had been on the

watch on the roof; had been on the lookout for somebody, whom he speedily conjectured to be Lucia.

He heard one of them say:

"When I crept down into the house, I could hear the negress and the boy talking about his dressing in woman's clothes and escaping. Then I passed the word to Faccini outside—and now the boy has just gone out. Faccini will get him. He will bring him here, and—there they come now."

It was true that other steps were approaching the door up the stairs. Then it opened, and two more men entered the room, followed by a third, or, rather, dragging a third person between them; and the voice of Faccini exclaimed:

"Did you think you could hoodwink me, boy? Not so."

Chick heard a sound as if the captive were sent spinning across the room; and then a loud exclamation from Faccini.

The man uttered a string of selected Italian oaths, and ended by saying:

"We have caught a prize! No wonder, my lady, that you tried to escape as a girl. You *are* a girl! But you should not have forgotten that Faccini would remember you. You are Lucia Deluzzio. Ah; I should have known you at once last night. It will be a short shift for you, my dear. Thrice a traitor, are you! Ten times suffering you shall have for what you have done. Why did you come here to spy upon us, girl?"

"Because I hate you! Because I hate all your kind!" retorted Lucia hotly. She was angered by the fact of her discovery. She knew her present danger, too, but it did not appal her.

"Well, your hate will not do us much more harm now. It is all over with you. You knew what you risked when you came here."

"To be sure I did."

"That was a pretty story you told about coming with a message for Filipo. How did you know that he was here?"

"I saw him on the street."

"And you guessed it was he?"

"Yes; by the likeness to his brother, Dominico, now in the Tombs."

"And you also guessed that he had escaped from Sing Sing?"

"No; you told me that. I supposed he had been liberated. I would have betrayed myself in that had you been less talkative."

"What was it that sent you here to us?"

"The Salvatore Volpe affair. I saw the letter. I knew it to be from this group, or I half guessed it."

The Italians were all standing so that they faced her now. Their backs were toward the door of the room; and into that open doorway suddenly appeared Chick. He had torn away the wig of wool. Lucia recognized him instantly, but she made no sign that she saw him, or any one, behind the men she was facing. She continued:

"I was right about that, too, wasn't I? You, Faccini, are the man who wrote the letter to Volpe. Aren't you?"

"Why, of course I am. What of it? There is another one almost ready to send. This time we demand *six* thousand of him. He will pay it, too, or——"

"Or what?" asked Lucia softly.

"We will steal his daughter and then demand seven thousand dollars to leave the others alone. If he does not pay then, we will steal another child, and demand eight thousand for the safety of the others; and so it will go on, and on."

Chick had stepped through the doorway now. There were four against him, for he did not know whether he could depend upon the assistance of the negro in a crisis or not.

But he did not count the cost of the struggle that was to follow. He believed that he could put two of the men out of business before they could do anything to protect themselves, and that would leave only a couple to contend with afterward.

He stepped forward softly and swiftly. Then he acted.

He struck out mightily with his fist, and Faccini received the terrific blow on the neck under his ear. He went down like a wet rag, and he did not move after he had fallen.

Another swinging left-hander caught Filipo Lacava in the solar plexus, and he doubled up like a jack-knife, and sank to the floor, groaning.

The other two sprang toward him with weapons drawn, but one of them fell to the floor before he could strike. Lucia had hurled the little empty pistol at him, and it struck him on the temple, knocking him senseless. And he fell just as the negro, who had gone to the flat with Chick, hit the last of the four an awful blow with a chair he had seized upon as a weapon.

It was all over almost as soon as it began.

To bind and handcuff the captured men was the work of a few minutes, and the negro assisted Chick in everything. He had proved himself to be a valuable adjunct to that attack.

It was all over, and the proof was in hand to convict the captured ones. More than that, an escaped convict was recaptured, and would be returned to finish out his sentence at Sing Sing.

There were two others of the group to wait for, and they presently appeared, proving to be the same men that Chick had caused to be arrested for a moment by Officer O'Neil earlier in the day.

And so that entire band of Black Hand assassins and blackmailers was captured; and thus had Lucia given adequate proof of her ability to work as an assistant to the great detective in his labor of running down criminals.

THE END.

The next number (659) will contain "A Dangerous Man; or, Nick Carter and the Famous Castor Case."

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THE DOG SKOOKUM.

CONCLUSION.

Jack Carter and Yukon Pete had started on a mad race to Dawson, each bent upon being the first to file a claim that would bring riches.

The tried huskies drew Jack's sled along at a capital pace. Now that the sky was clear, he had a good view of the stars, and from these he was able to guide himself on a due southerly course. It was not necessary now to keep to the trail which wound irregularly on its way to Dawson.

"We're making good time," said Jack delightedly, looking about him. "I don't think Pete'll get the inside track of us this time, after all. Well, every man for himself. Here, you, Skookum! What do you mean by it?" Skookum had halted suddenly in his tracks, and was now sniffing the air keenly. "Get along, boy! We must get there some time!"

But Skookum raised his nose in the air, and gave vent to a loud and prolonged howl. Jack was wildly surprised when he heard an answering cry, coming from immediately behind him.

"Some one else on the road, eh?" he ruminated. "Wonder who it is? Can it be Pete? Get along, Skookum!"

Skookum answered to the crack of the whip, and strained nobly at the traces; but there was another dog of the team who had scented the team behind. He refused to budge another step, and Skookum, to uphold his dignity as "boss" of the team, wheeled to deliver just chastisement to the offender. The next minute two huskies were fighting as though for their lives, in spite of the blows from Jack's lustily wielded whip.

"Quit it!" roared the lad, lashing out to right and left; but the combatants were too engrossed to hear. Another cut, and Skookum released his hold for a moment, only to get a better grip on his enemy's furry coat.

"Good night, partner!"

Jack had been occupied in his forceful peacemaking until he had quite forgotten the proximity of other travelers. But another sled drew up, drawn by eight dogs, and occupied by two men.

"Good night," replied Jack, still swinging his whip, and not looking around to see who it was.

"Going to Dawson?" asked the other carelessly. Then Jack turned, and saw the leering face of Yukon Pete, with Siwash Billy sitting close by him.

"I am," replied Jack curtly, "if I can get these brutes to come to reason."

He turned again to deliver another stroke.

"I guess you're not going another step farther," said Pete with an evil grin. Jack flushed and turned round, to find himself staring down the muzzle of a revolver. Pete chuckled from his position behind the gun. "I have reasons for not wanting you to go there until I've been and come back," he went on. "Here, you, Billy, trice him up!"

Jack's hands had gone instinctively above his head the moment he discovered he was dropped.

"I don't know what you call this," he said, "but if it's a joke, then you'll find it's more serious than you think. There's law—even in the Yukon—remember!"

"I don't care a straw for the law," was the reply. "Now, Billy, trice him up while I keep him covered."

"You beast!" gritted Jack as the Siwash began to obey. "Is this your gratitude? Here, not so tight!" For Billy was stolidly tying cunning knots to the rope which he passed round his prisoner's body and arms.

"Good!" remarked Pete when the work was finished. "Now take a seat on this sled, please, Mister Jack! Billy will look after your team. There, now; you'll be all right until I can think of a suitable way of getting rid of you. You're right, sonny, in one respect; there is a law in this land, and it wouldn't be as well for me to kill you. Guess I'll think out a plan within the next thirty miles or so."

Jack was laid on the sled, while Billy, who had succeeded in restoring peace between Skookum and his foe, sat on the other, taking up his position behind his master.

They drove on for several miles, Pete evidently thinking, for he said nothing beyond ripping out an impatient oath at the head of an offending husky.

Jack's brain was a medley as he lay there; he could not help wondering what Pete was meditating doing with him. And, again, he was bitter in his thoughts at being forestalled by the rogue at his side. Just now it looked as though all his dreams of wealth were to be shattered to the ground.

Suddenly Pete gave out a grunt of approval. The teams had approached a solitary, fire-killed tree, such as can often be seen in the midst of a waste of bare country.

Pete called a halt. "Tie the brat up to that!" he said curtly. Billy rose from his position among the robes to obey, and, in spite of his protests, Jack was dragged to the scraggy spruce, and, with a few feet of rope to spare, he was bound to it.

"Wait till I get out of this," he growled, struggling against the Siwash's operations. "I'll let you know something, I will!"

Billy's face was as stolid as ever, but he snatched the lad's fur mitt before he took his departure, and Jack cried out in rage at the act.

"All right!" he heard Billy whisper, to his surprise. "I'll help you if I can! I don't forget."

"I think I was very kind," said Pete jeeringly to his prisoner. "I've left you lots of rope, so that you can walk about and keep from freezing. Good night, partner, and when that claim's mine, p'raps I'll come and let you free—if you're alive! So long! Oh, I might as well tell you that I'm glad I had the chance of getting back on you for that time you interfered with me. Also, I knew that you had struck it rich; in fact, I was following you, and it is your claim I'm going to file. That's why I want to get to Dawson first. Well, I hope you'll have a good time. Be good!"

And with a chuckle he called to his dogs, and started away, Siwash Billy following stolidly in his wake, leaving the lad staring angrily after them.

It was almost an hour before Jack rightly realized his true position. In that hour his sole thoughts were of rage toward the treachery of Pete—and of Siwash Billy. For Billy's parting words had not been taken as they had apparently

been meant. It was only when he began to grow numb with the biting cold that he saw the seriousness of his predicament. To be tied to a solitary tree in a bare country, when the thermometer stood many degrees below, has to be experienced to be thoroughly understood. When the frost began to work through his muck-lucks, he remembered that action was the only thing which would keep him from freezing; and he began to march steadily round the tree, only turning and going in the opposite direction when his five feet of rope gave out and he was close to the stump. Then he would return, keeping it up for two hours. It might have looked ridiculous to some who might have seen him; to Jack it assumed a more and more grim aspect as time crawled on. He grew tired, and sat down to rest a while. Then he started up again with a gasp as he saw in the moonlight a dark, shadowy shape approaching, followed by another, and another, until half a dozen could be seen. He saw, coming from each, two bright, glowing sparks, green in color. He felt his knees tremble. Wolves, gaunt and hungry, had scented him from afar.

He gave a wild shout, and saw the forms slink away. So they were cowards? This gave the lad hope. He did not know the habits of the animals; he did not know that they would not attack a man until they were sure he was helpless. As long as he shouted and shrieked they would keep their distance.

Accordingly, he shouted and screamed lustily until he was hoarse. He stamped in the snow, kicking the powdery stuff in clouds about him, and the wolves, puzzled, kept their distance, only approaching nearer when he ceased for rest and breath. Then, when they came close again, he continued his shouting, sending them scurrying off with their loud howls. But each time they returned he noticed they came nearer.

His heart was full of despair; he knew that sooner or later they must win; he could not stamp, and walk, and shout forever; but he set his teeth grimly, and determined to prolong his life until the last possible moment. Once, a wolf, rather more courageous than the rest, advanced and sniffed at his leg. With his heart in his mouth he kicked out savagely, catching the brute in the chops, and sending it scuttling off.

And now he was nigh exhausted; yet he dare not give in. He gave another shriek as he saw two wolves drawing close. Then his heart bounded as he heard a cry come from away over the waste of snow. He knew that cry; it was not human; it was a loud, baying bark; it was Skookum!

He had no time to wonder how Skookum had got free; he was now too busy shrieking, stamping, and kicking. And after what seemed hours of heart-straining waiting, his dog team, led by Skookum, dashed up, snapping and snarling fiercely, all harnessed together, but ready for a fight, as all huskies ever are. The wolves stood stock-still for a moment, until Skookum seized the most daring by the throat. A twist, a snarl, and the wolf lay bleeding in the snow, its throat literally torn out. The dogs were handicapped by the harness, by the sled to which they were still hitched; but they had superior numbers, and this was enough for the wolves. Those who remained, though Skookum accounted for two more, tucked their tails between their legs and ran, howling the while.

Jack was nigh fainting with the reaction, and watched the dogs start off in pursuit as a man in a dream. It was only when they returned that he pulled himself together.

Skookum was fawning at his feet, looking up into his face with doglike affection. And Jack, though saved from the wolves, remembered that he was still in his awkward position. Skookum could not free him from his bonds.

But stay! What was that gleaming on Skookum's throat?

"Good dog!" he called, and the husky stood still, while Jack peered closely. Yes, sure enough, hanging from a loose cord was an open jackknife. Billy had proved a friend in need after all!

He gave no more thought to Siwash Billy, however, but attempted to reach this means of salvation. His hands were tied behind him, but if he could only get the dog to stand still for a moment, he could, by turning round, touch it Skookum seemed to know what was desired of him, and he fell in with his master's wishes readily. After much twisting the lad succeeded, and the knife was pulled from its position. Then, though he gashed his wrists once or twice in the operation, he managed to work it among his bonds, until they fell away. He was free!

"Now," he said grimly, "we'll go on our way, and if Pete gets to Dawson first, and even if he files that claim, he'll have to face me! All right, Skookum, old chap, put all you know into it!"

Skookum willingly obeyed; the dog team stretched themselves out eagerly, and mile upon mile was covered, until Dawson was almost within sight. By now the sun was high in the heavens, and the lad could see the trail of another sled in the snow.

"If that's Pete," he said, "well and good. I'll have a reckoning with him, you bet, at Dawson!"

But he met Pete before he reached Dawson, and Pete was not able to express either joy or sorrow at the meeting, for he was lying in the snow on the very outskirts of the town, with Siwash Billy sitting close by.

Billy showed no surprise at the appearance of the lad. He merely explained how he had worked out a plan for the lad's release. He had fallen out of the sled purposely, he said. Then he had let Skookum sniff at Jack's mitt. Jack understood now why Billy had stolen it.

"I then tied a knife to the dog's neck," said Billy, "and let the dogs do the rest. I am glad my plan worked, for you were good to my boy."

Jack walked over to the prostrate Pete; he was lying still, a blue tinge on his face, his eyes closed.

"He's not dead," volunteered Billy. "I left it for you to kill him. When I let your sled go, I shouted, and Pete he hear me. I tol' him I had fallen out; he did not believe. He struck me with his whip, and I was angry. At first, I dared not help you openly; but that blow made me forget my fear of him. I struggled, and he tried to shoot; but I took the gun away from him, and struck him with it. He has not filed your claim yet. You can now do it."

And that was all Siwash Billy would say about the matter. Though Jack tried and tried again to thank him, he merely shrugged his shoulders.

And the first thing Jack did—after, of course, giving Pete over to the Mounted Police—was to register his name to the gold claim, which the following summer was the cause of changing No-Gold Mining Camp's name to Lucky Hit.

SOME WONDERFUL TREES.

The axe of the lumberman is fast destroying the giants of our primeval forests, and the government recently sent an expert forester to secure a magnificent cut from one of the giant Sequoias of Southern California. The tree stood over 300 feet in height, and measured 90 feet at the base. A section 20 feet above the ground was obtained, 4 feet thick and weighing 50 tons. The diameter of the block is a little over 18 feet, and its circumference measures 56 feet. The specimen is highly polished, and the curator of the museum has illustrated the life history of the tree in a striking and unique manner by placing tags marking every hundred years of growth, which is estimated from the cross section concentric rings. In addition, the great events and happenings in geology and other sciences are likewise recorded in these rings.

The tree began to grow 550 A. D., and was 13 feet in diameter when Columbus reached the shores of America. Some of the trees in the same vicinity are said to be from

five thousand to eight thousand years old. Forest experts have estimated that a tree of this size contains 750,000 feet of lumber, which, being cut into telegraph poles 8 to 9 inches at the base and 4 to 5 at the top, and 24 feet high, would make one pole 40 miles long.

A rain tree is the latest novelty reported. A consul in Colombia writes that in the woods adjacent to the city of Moyobamba exists a tree called by the natives "rain tree," which possesses some remarkable qualities. It is a tree of about 50 feet high when at maturity and about 3 feet in diameter at the base, and has the property of absorbing an immense quantity of humidity from the atmosphere, which it concentrates and subsequently pours forth from its leaves and branches in a shower, and in such abundance that in many cases the ground in its neighborhood is converted into a perfect bog. It possesses this curious property in its greatest degree in the summer, precisely when the rivers are at their lowest and water most scarce; and the writer proposes that it should be planted in the more arid regions of Peru for the benefit of agriculturists.

At Sierra Leone is found the cream fruit tree, the fruit of which is very agreeable in taste. In Ceylon there is the bread fruit tree, from which a food is made in the same way that we make bread. It is said to be equally good and nutritious. In South America we find the milk tree. There is a tree which grows in Sumatra, Algeria, and China which is known as the vegetable tallow tree. Excellent candles are made from the berries of a tree which grows in some parts of South Africa and the Azores.

It is said that a fruit supposed to bear the mark of Eve's teeth is one of the many botanical curiosities of Ceylon. The tree on which it grows is known by the significant name of "forbidden fruit," or "Eve's apple tree." The blossom has a very pleasant scent, but the really remarkable feature of the tree, the one to which it owes its name, is the fruit. It is beautiful, and hangs from the tree in a peculiar manner. Orange on the outside and deep crimson within, each fruit has the appearance of having had a piece bitten out of it. This fact, together with its poisonous quality, led the Mohammedans to represent it as the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden, and to warn men against its noxious properties.

Santa Rosa, capital of Santa Rosa County, California, has a Baptist church, which holds over two hundred people, built entirely from the timber sawn out of a single redwood. Timbers, weather boarding, and inner lining are all of wood, there being no plaster or bricks and mortar about it. The roofing, too, is of shingles cut out from the same tree; and after it was all finished there were sixty thousand shingles left. A sister tree to the above gave constant employment in reducing it to shingles to two hard-working men for two whole years.

The musical tree, found in the West India Islands, has a peculiarly shaped leaf, and pods with a split or open edge. The wind passing through these forms the sound which gives the tree its peculiar name. In Barbados there is a valley filled with these trees, and when the trade winds blow across the island a constant moaning deep-toned whistle is heard from it, which, in the still hours of the night, has a very weird and unpleasant effect. A species of acacia, growing abundantly in the Soudan, is also called the whistling tree. Its shoots are frequently, by the agency of the larvæ of insects, distorted in shape and swollen into a globular bladder, from one inch to two inches in diameter. After the insect has emerged from a circular hole in the side of the swelling, the opening, played upon by the wind, becomes a musical instrument equal in sound to a sweet-toned flute.

A German authority has recently announced the discovery of a tree in the forests of Central India which has most curious characteristics. The leaves of the tree are of a highly sensitive nature, and so full of electricity that whosoever touches one of them receives an electric shock. It has a very peculiar effect upon the magnetic needle, and will influence it at a distance of even seventy feet. The electrical strength of the tree varies according to the time of day, it being strongest at midday and weakest at midnight. In wet weather its powers disappear altogether. Birds never approach the tree, nor have insects ever been seen upon it.

One of the great treasures in the Hohenzollern Museum at Berlin is a fragment of wood from an ancient pear tree at the foot of the Untersberg, near Salzburg, which, according to tradition, would blossom and bear so long as the German Empire flourished, but would die with the fall of the imperial power. In 1806, when the Empire was dissolved and the Confederation of the Rhine formed, the tree withered away, and the poet Chamisso alluded to the old legend in one of his poems. The tree remained lifeless for over sixty years, but in 1871, after the establishment of the new German Empire, the old trunk suddenly put forth branches, blossomed, and bore fruit.

There has been discovered in the wilds of northwest Idaho a species of the acacia tree which is entitled to be classed as one of the wonders of plant life. It grows to a height of about eight feet, and when full grown closes its leaves together in coils each day at sunset, and curls its twigs to the shape of pigtails. After the tree has settled itself thus for a night's sleep, if touched, the whole thing will flutter as if agitated or impatient at being disturbed. The oftener the foliage is molested the more violent becomes the shaking of the branches, and at length the tree emits a nauseating odor, which, if inhaled for a few moments, causes a violent dizzy headache. The angry tree, as it has been named, was discovered by travelers, who, upon making camp for the night, placed one end of a canvas covering over one of the sensitive bushes, using it for a support. Immediately the tree began to sharply jerk its branches. The motion continued, growing more severe, until at last the sickening odor which it gave out drove the tired campers to a more friendly location.

Curiosity, of course, prompted an investigation. One of the angry trees was dug up and thrown to one side. Immediately upon being removed from the ground the tree opened its leaves, its twigs lost their pigtails, and for something over an hour and a half the enraged branches showed their indignation by a series of quakings, which grew weaker as time passed, finally ceasing altogether, when the foliage hung limp and withered. The next morning the tree was placed upright in the ground again, a little water was applied to the roots, and very soon it resumed its normal condition.

BEARS GENERALLY JOLLY.

"Rarely are bears born ill-tempered. They may show some resentment at the time of their capture when but two months old, but this feeling soon disappears, leaving a jolly rogue ever willing to box and wrestle. I once knew a cub that was a regular terror," says a writer in *Collier's*, "and he never reformed. He would attack anything regardless of its size or strength.

"At the age of three months he would charge at me, snorting, sniffing, and striking with his tiny paws, and when I did not protect myself he seized my trousers leg between his teeth and shook it violently.

"At first I thought that he had been abused by his former owner and that by kind treatment he would soon outgrow his temper, but no, he just had it in him, and he became more and more dangerous as time sped by.

"Finally he grew large enough to be put in with the mature bears without danger of his squeezing between the bars and escaping, and, to the surprise of every one, he immediately took charge of the den. Old bears twenty times his size, possibly from some sense of honor, if animals have honor, submitted to cuffs and slaps in the face, and actually allowed him to snatch food from their mouths without resenting the insult."

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